

Yada Yada Yada: A Sociolinguistic and Rhetorical Analysis of Humor in *Seinfeld*

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Abstract

Using sociolinguistic and rhetorical analysis, this study explores how *Seinfeld*'s four main characters utilize and violate linguistic politeness norms, as outlined in speech act theory, the Cooperative Principle, and Politeness Theory. Though eleven episodes were carefully selected and analyzed, this paper focuses on two in particular, "The Truth" and "The Nose Job," both of which feature humorous use of these linguistic theories. The analyses begin with a brief overview and transcription of a particular scene. Then the expected course of action is laid out to determine the extent the dialogue complies with the expectations of the exchange (e.g., the felicity conditions of the speech act used, appropriate usage of maxims, possible politeness strategies) noting how and why the characters utilize or ignore these linguistic conventions. Finally, the four rhetorical functions of humor are employed as an analytical tool to identify and interpret the message(s) *Seinfeld* conveys in each scene. These sections relate back to the pragmatic analysis and comment on how the particular violation defends or criticizes the norm. The overall conclusions drawn from this study support the idea that when characters challenge a convention and are punished, or not rewarded, the convention is logical and necessary. On the other hand, when they are rewarded for their subversive behavior, we must reevaluate the logic behind the norm at hand.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Rhetorical Functions of Humor, *Seinfeld*

1. Introduction

Many scholars liken *Seinfeld* to a "modern comedy of manners" in which the primary source of comedy comes from characters challenging the "established or 'unspoken' rules of conduct."^{1 2} After reviewing the literature, it is apparent that there is something inherently funny about the character's subversive behavior when challenging these norms.

Previous studies tend to address social conventions involving actions and behavior, such as the acceptability of saving seats at the movies and parking head-first versus backing in. These studies argue that when a character challenges a social convention and gets punished, or not rewarded, *Seinfeld* conveys the social acceptability and necessity of the act. On the other hand, when a character is rewarded for his or her subversive behavior, the show begs viewers to reevaluate the logic behind the norm at hand.^{3 4 5 6 7} This, however, leaves a salient lack of research dedicated to the message behind violated linguistic conventions.

2. Methodology

Sociolinguistic and rhetorical analysis of conversational humor—as opposed to formal jokes with a set-up and punch line—is crucial to further our understanding of social satire and the message when social and linguistic conventions are violated in comedy. This study explores *Seinfeld*'s humor and social commentary by analyzing how characters utilize and violate social conventions that involve the principles outlined in speech act theory, Cooperative Principle, and politeness theory.

To briefly review these three concepts, a speech act is any utterance that performs an action by saying it, (e.g., saying, “I’m sorry,” is an *apology*). A valid speech act must meet all the felicity conditions of the act, including those relating to appropriate circumstances for performing the act, propositional content of the utterance appropriate to the act, speaker sincerity, and willingness to perform the act.⁸

The Cooperative Principle describes how speakers should appropriately contribute to a conversation so that it can move forward in an orderly and logical fashion. In doing so, Grice explains, speakers follow or violate four maxims of conversation: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner.⁸ When these maxims are intentionally violated, or *flouted*, speakers generate suggested meanings, or *implicatures*, hoping hearers will notice the violation and be able to infer what the speaker is really trying to say.⁹

Brown and Levinson extended these ideas, among others, with politeness theory. This theory does not refer to social etiquette but rather explains the various strategies speakers innately use to adjust what they say so as not to put off or offend their listeners.¹⁰ Every human interaction is face-threatening to some extent, so in order to preserve their own face and the face of others, speakers utilize four types of politeness strategies: baldly on-record,¹¹ on-record with positive politeness (sympathy),¹² on-record with negative politeness (deference),¹³ and off-record politeness (indirect speech).¹⁴ These strategies allow speakers to mitigate the weight, or seriousness, of face-threatening acts.¹⁵

Some linguists have argued that the major flaw in the Cooperative Principle and politeness theory is that they assume “the speaker and the hearer are working in perfect harmony, each trying to save the other’s face.”¹⁶ Quite often it seems like speakers are more concerned about their own individual needs than the needs of others. When this is true, the conversation may become strained because of a clash or incongruity. This is a crucial point that opens up the discussion of social and linguistic deviance and the potential for humor.

By accepting these theories as guidelines for linguistic norms, deviations from these norms are likely to give rise to a humorous incongruity. But as Paulos notes, “[i]ncongruity by itself is not... a sufficient condition for humor....”¹⁷ Therefore, it is necessary to consider the context of the incongruity to determine whether or not it is humorous and, if so, what message is being conveyed. As a sitcom, *Seinfeld* inherently features an “appropriate emotional climate” for humor.¹⁸

Finally, Meyer¹⁹ discusses how four rhetorical functions of humor—identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation—can offer more concrete insight into the purpose of humor and the messages it sends. Identification and clarification unify speakers and audiences by equalizing the relationship between them. Additionally, clarification teaches the socially expected behaviors through the use of incongruity by emphasizing the normal situation and noting the humorous divergence or violation of norms without harsh criticism. On the other hand, divisive humor utilizes enforcement and differentiation to emphasize why certain violations are unacceptable and need to be corrected or avoided. These often take a more critical approach to show clear distinctions. Though the function of *Seinfeld*'s humor varies from episode to episode and even between plotlines, they are crucial in explaining the show’s social critique.

Based on the theories presented here, I ask the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do the characters violate linguistic politeness norms?
- RQ2: What is the message when characters face, challenge, or violate linguistic conventions?
- RQ3: How does *Seinfeld* criticize and defend the rules of pragmatics through its use of humor?

To answer these questions, eleven episodes featuring clear examples of the aforementioned theories were analyzed (“The Chinese Restaurant,” (1991), “The Phone Message” (1991), “The Truth” (1991), “The Nose Job” (1991), “The Limo” (1992), “The Visa” (1993), “The Implant” (1993), “The Big Salad” (1994), “The Kiss Hello” (1995), “The Susie” (1997), and “The Yada Yada” (1997)). These episodes were deliberately chosen because they feature humorous instances in which one or more characters utters an infelicitous speech act; violates, exploits, or flouts maxims; and fail to utilize appropriate politeness strategies, either intentionally or unintentionally.

For the purposes of this paper, the focus is limited to two issues that exemplify the conclusions drawn from the larger study. Each analysis begins with a brief overview of the issue and transcription of the scene. Then the expected course of action is laid out to determine the extent the dialogue complies with the expectations of the exchange (e.g.,

the felicity conditions of the speech act used, appropriate usage of maxims, possible politeness strategies) noting how and why the characters utilize or ignore these linguistic conventions. Finally, the four rhetorical functions of humor are employed as an analytical tool to identify and interpret the message(s) *Seinfeld* conveys in each scene. This section relates back to the pragmatic analysis to comment on how the particular violation defends or criticizes the norm. Using pragmatic and rhetorical analysis, this study aims to illustrate the humor and messages resulting from violations of linguistic norms.

3. Truth and Lies

The episodes “The Truth” and “The Nose Job” exemplify the positive and negative consequences of telling the truth and lying. In both episodes, the norm or expectation is for the characters to lie since the truth is insulting. Brown and Levinson note that speakers use white lies (a positive politeness sub-strategy of *avoid disagreement*) when they are put in a situation where they must state an opinion but do not want to damage the hearer’s positive face, even when both the speaker and hearer know that the speaker is lying.²⁰ As the following analyses show, different situations call for different strategies.

3.1 “The Truth”

“The Truth” reevaluates the logic behind socially and linguistically polite break-ups and questions why we lie or use clichés rather than tell the truth to do so. In this scene, George is eating lunch with his girlfriend, Patrice, and decides to break-up with her:

- 1 GEORGE: I don’t think we should see each other anymore. You’re great. But I’m-I’m *riddled* with
- 2 personal problems.
- 3 PATRICE: What did I do?
- 4 GEORGE: Nothing. It’s not you. It’s me. I have a fear of commitment. I don’t know how to love.
- 5 PATRICE: You hate my earrings don’t you?
- 6 GEORGE: No, no.
- 7 PATRICE: And you didn’t comment on the chopsticks.
- 8 GEORGE: I love the chopsticks. I-I personally prefer a fork but they look very nice.
- 9 PATRICE: You’re not telling me the truth. I must have done something.
- 10 GEORGE: I have a fear of intimacy.
- 11 PATRICE: Don’t give me clichés. I have a right to know. What did I do wrong?
- 12 GEORGE: Nothing. It’s not *you*.
- 13 PATRICE: I want the truth.
- TURN** 14 GEORGE: The truth? You want the *truth*? It *is* your earrings! It *is* the chopsticks! But it’s so much
- 15 more. You’re *pretentious*. You call everyone by their *full* name. You call my doorman, Sammy,
- 16 “Samuel,” but you didn’t even say “Samuel” You went “Sam-u-EL.” Pappie-ay Ma-*shay*? What is
- 17 Papie-ay Ma-shay?
- 18 PATRICE: Keep going.
- 19 GEORGE: I-I think I made my point. I’m sorry if I was a little harsh.
- 20 PATRICE: No, I asked for the truth. Thank you for being so honest.
- 21 GEORGE: Can I, uh, can I walk you back to work?
- 22 PATRICE: I really prefer to go alone.

Figure 1. “The Truth”

Initially, George abides by the unwritten rule of break-ups when he lies and puts the blame on himself. His first lines employ several positive politeness strategies: he softens the emotional blow by *exaggerating his interest* in Patrice (“You’re great,” Figure 1., l. 1) then *gives a reason* for wanting to break-up (“I’m riddled with personal problems,” Figure 1., ll. 1-2). Though his admissions of guilt damage his face while flattering hers, George is telling white lies for her benefit. Combatting her assertions that there is something about her that he doesn’t like, George even *jokes* about preferring forks over chopsticks to lighten the mood (Figure 1., l. 8). Though George tries to abide by this

convention of white lies and clichés, it fails to be an effective break-up strategy, as evidenced by Patrice’s persistence to hear the truth.

This marks a major turn in the scene. Instead of standing by his lies, George violates and challenges the break-up norm by being honest and goes baldly on-record detailing the rather long-winded truth (Fig. 1., ll. 14-17). Though Patrice acts cool and understanding, we soon find out that hearing the truth had serious emotional and real-world repercussions for her when she decides to check herself into a mental institution to help cope with the pain of the break-up. Upon hearing this news, George feels immense guilt for having apparently ruined her life. He realizes this is much worse than being in an unwanted relationship and vows to visit her in the hospital to convince her to check out and go back to work. Doing so, he hopes, will alleviate his personal guilt so they can both continue with their lives.

After the truth turned out to be much worse than lying, George resorts back to lies when he talks to Patrice in the hospital. Few of his lines in this scene are sincere and truthful, which, contrary to the old adage, “honesty is the best policy,” actually helps the situation. By lying to Patrice and standing by his lies, George makes up for his earlier comments and finds peace with himself and with her; however, this leads to the two getting back together.

In the end, George is not technically rewarded for lying, but he is not as severely punished as he was for telling the truth. In this instance, the truth attacked Patrice’s personal identity and puts George in a worse position than before. When George realizes he would rather be miserable dating Patrice than feel the guilt of having put her in a mental institution, *Seinfeld* clarifies it is much better to lie in this situation than tell the truth.

3.2 “The Nose Job”

One of the many anomalies of Kramer’s personality is that he finds few acts face-threatening. Without concern for redress, he feels free to say and do things most people would deem reprehensible. This explains why most of his face-threatening acts are performed baldly on-record. For instance, it seems Kramer was never taught, “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all,” or at least lie about it. “The Nose Job” shows how this is not necessarily a bad thing.

In this episode, George is dating a girl (Audrey) who, he admits confidentially to Jerry, is physically perfect except for her nose. Later on, everyone is eating pizza at Jerry’s when the topic of beautiful women comes up:

- 1 AUDREY: It’s amazing how many beautiful women live in New York. I actually find it kind of
- 2 intimidating.
- 3 KRAMER: Well, you’re as pretty as any of them, you just need a nose job.
- 4 ELAINE: Kramer!
- 5 KRAMER: What? What?
- 6 ELAINE: How could you say something like that?
- 7 KRAMER: What? What do you mean? I just said she needs a nose job.
- 8 ELAINE: No, no, there’s nothing wrong with her nose! I’m so sorry, Audrey.
- 9 AUDREY: No, it’s ok.
- 10 ELAINE: What did you have to say that for?
- 11 KRAMER: Well, I was just trying to help out.
- 12 ELAINE: Yeah? Well, you can kiss that jacket goodbye, Mr. Von Nozzin.
- 13 KRAMER: You see what happens when you try to be nice?

Figure 2. “The Nose Job”

In the first two lines, Audrey flouts Quantity to implicate that the beautiful New York women intimidate her because her nose keeps her from being one of them. By putting herself down, she fishes for a compliment or, at least, some sort of reassurance in her looks. At this point, the social expectation is for someone to disagree with her (i.e., lie) to make her feel better. Kramer fulfills this expectation when he tells her she’s “just as pretty as any of them.” By itself, this is a white lie, since everyone knows this is not true, but functions as a compliment, thus flattering Audrey’s positive face. Kramer crosses a line when he conditions his compliment with, “you just need a nose job” (Fig. 2., l. 3). Adding this means he is no longer lying to her, but telling the truth is insulting. In Gricean terms, Kramer violates Quantity (saying more than the conversation required) to satisfy Quality.

Of course, Kramer did not intend this as an insult. In fact, he does not even seem to realize it could be interpreted as one. His next lines suggest that he meant the entire utterance as a compliment. Regardless of his intention, Elaine punishes him for his telling the truth (the violation) by chastising him in front of his friends.

Later on, Audrey ends up deciding to get a nose job. Though we never see her nose, we do see everyone's reaction after she reveals it, and it isn't good. Knowing that the last thing Audrey wants to hear after going through with the procedure is that she looks worse than before, Jerry and Elaine lie to her to be socially and linguistically polite. Although Jerry and Elaine are not rewarded, per se, for abiding by this convention, they are not punished either, thus clarifying the acceptability of white lies. Kramer, however, wastes no time in telling Audrey the truth, "[she] got butchered," once again violating the convention.

The next time George and Audrey are together, George is very obviously bothered by her nose and, after being socially and linguistically uncooperative, she ends up breaking up with him. Though it appears this is the last time we will see Audrey, she shows up at Monk's near the end of the episode with a beautiful new nose. Surprisingly, she is there to meet Kramer. After his earlier remarks about her nose, it seemed unlikely that she would ever want to see him again, but Audrey defies this expectation when we find out that the two are romantically involved. In this hilarious turn of events, it seems Kramer was actually rewarded for telling the truth (i.e., violating the norm).

While white lies help to avoid being offensive, they perpetuate issues by withholding the truth. This is not to say that white lies are all together bad; if they were, Jerry and Elaine would have been "punished" when they told Audrey her "butchered" nose job looked great. Therefore, we can conclude that both white lies and the truth are appropriate in this particular situation for different reasons; lying avoids offending Audrey, while knowing the truth helps her to avoid further embarrassment.

Contrary to the lesson in "The Truth," this episode utilizes differentiation to show that sometimes the "polite" thing to do is, not to lie, but to be honest after all. This seems incongruous because Kramer is rewarded for violating a social convention we expect him to be punished for. The key difference in this episode is that Kramer critiques a *physical* flaw in Audrey rather than one concerning her personal identity. While this is still insulting, it is much easier for Audrey to change the appearance of her nose than it would be for her to change her personality or behavior. The incongruous conclusion of this episode further clarifies that brutal honesty can work to a speaker's advantage, even when it seems impolite, as long as the hearer benefits too.

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, this analysis has shown how *Seinfeld* criticizes and defends social and linguistic conventions through its use of humor. When the characters challenge a convention and are punished, or not rewarded, the show suggests the convention is logical and necessary. On the other hand, when they are rewarded for their subversive behavior, the show begs viewers to reevaluate the logic behind the norm at hand, and therein lies some of the satisfaction of engaging this text.

One of the primary reasons that *Seinfeld* is so entertaining is the characters' unabashed willingness to engage in socially deviant behavior. They say and do things viewers know they can't, but have always wanted to. Though they all take minute problems to absurd extremes, the characters and their problems are familiar if not relatable.

Finally, this study also illustrates how the use and misuse of these linguistic principles can be exploited for comedic purposes. Though the comedic potential apparent in exploiting these linguistic theories and principles has primarily interested linguists and other scholars, it may also interest comedians who wish to incorporate these effects in their writing. Given that speakers employ the rules of pragmatics unconsciously, it is unlikely that many writers are aware of the potential for humor that results from violations of these theories. But writers who are aware of the pragmatic functions of language may be able to consciously manipulate them to comedic ends. At the very least, understanding these concepts may enhance the viewing experience and enjoyment of popular media for viewers and critics alike.

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