

Utterance within a Contextual Meaning of Pop-culture

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to compare the pragmatics of utterances when taken in a pop-cultural context. Utterances in such cultural schemata may be used to define characteristic speech patterns and specify the limits of cultural competence, engender stereotypes, and create descriptive possibilities leading to comic results. Three pop-culture characters are chosen to illustrate how such contextualization can arise from the consistent and specific use of utterance. A brief introduction is made to each given character to determine how either specific or patternistic forms of utterance shape and color those characterizations that help to form these discernible pop-cultural icons. Finally, conclusions are made that will further explain how important speech acts such as utterance are so open to comedic possibility in a variety of pop-cultural situations.

Keywords: Pragmatics, pop-culture, comedy, utterance, contextualization, relevance, cultural schemata.

Introduction

Much of what we find funny is due in large part to a simple misunderstanding of what is said or meant to be said. Whether it is a malapropism, a misstatement, a mistake, or a mispronunciation, language is rife with the possibility to laugh at ourselves or others if we so choose. A lack of coherence is far more subtle than the act of deliberately telling a joke based on irony, satire, physicality or timing. Entire comedy routines or characterizations may be based upon a single utterance or on the habitual use of a set of utterances. Often pop-cultural icons make their appearance or set their demise on the use of a single timely utterance.

Graphic representations of pop-culture characters which are verbally impaired, dysfunctional, inarticulate, tongue-tied or downright silent abound in film, print, or on-line. The inability to communicate effectively is usually compensated for in some exaggerated way, with decidedly comedic effect in most cases. For example, in American comic books, it could be evidenced in physicist “David Banner’s” alter-ego “The Hulk” from “The Incredible Hulk” (“Hulk smash!”), or the tree-like alien life form “Groot” (*I am Groot!*) from “The Guardians of the Galaxy”. In films, it could be seen in the strangely silent “Harpo” Marx who let his bulbous claxon horn or concert harp do his “talking”, or in the youngest of the Walt Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarves (1939)”, “Dopey” who tripped and fell and generally upstaged the rest of his brothers with an ever nuanced blink. *Star Wars’* C-3PO is the only one to understand the seemingly incompressible “beeps”, “clicks”, and whoops” of his comical droid sidekick “R-2D2”. Likewise, “Hans Solo” is fully conversant in translating the “snarls” and roars” of his shaggy wookiee-partner “Chewbacca”. There’s the “Terminator” character portrayed famously by Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose oft-repeated catch-phrase is “I’ll be back!” Or, it may be found on American television with the ever laconic, morose, and over-sized “Lurch” from the “Addams’ Family” series; “Officer Gunther Toody’s ‘Oooh! Oooh!’” from the 60’s TV show “Car 54, Where Are You?”, or with the recent silent sufferings of “Tapeface” from the syndicated TV show “America’s Got Talent - 2016”.

Of course, there is an entire pantheon of manic and anthropomorphized animated characters who without utterance, would quickly be forgotten (i.e., “Daffy Duck”, “Sooty and Sweeps”, “Porky Pig”, “Charlie the Unicorn”, “Krazy Kat”, “Baby Huey”, “Felix the Kat”, “Donald Duck”, “Detective Mittens” and “Sylvester J. Pussycat”, etc.). All of these pop-culture characters and more are made the more memorable because of what they do not say, how they mangle speech, or in the unique way they all say next to nothing through absurd utterances.

Utterance

The noted *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “an utterance” as an uninterrupted chain of spoken or written language which comprises a complete unit of speech in any spoken language. Normally, the form of utterance may be bounded prosodically on each side of the utterance by a moment of silence, which will give it a distinctive or determinant setting. Utterances are definable as single words, groups of words, clauses or even as complete sentences. However, there is a real difference between sentences and utterances. Linguistically, the spoken words between two pauses may be referred to as an utterance; on the other hand, in either written or spoken form, a sentence is a group of words that conveys a complete meaning or thought by means of a subject and verb. Utterance may be represented in written language in a variety of ways; but, for the most part, they are simply representations of what someone has probably heard, rather than what is actually to be understood. Their expression may be either irrelevant or lacking in context, thus forming the kind of comedic premise upon which this study is based.

Among theorists of spoken utterances, Yachting (1986) and Grice (1989) provide a fundamental view of how utterance may be contextualized and then provide a further context for reasonable dialogue. Utterances have always prevailed in spoken language because they are popular, representative, appealing, and often used to great effect in given situations or culturally-specific contexts.

Bakhtin (1986) proposed four properties with which to codify all utterances. These were identified in the following ways.

- 1.) *Boundaries*: Utterances must be bounded by a "change of speech subject", usually by some form of silence.
- 2.) *Responsively /Dialogicity*: An utterance must either respond to, or follow after another previous utterance. This is done in order to generate further dialogue.
- 3.) *Finalization*: An utterance must have a perceptible ending, occurring after the speaker has completed the desired spoken dialogue.
- 4.) *Generic form*: The speech genre is determinable based on the specific circumstances and the context in which the dialogue is set.

Bakhtin did not consider utterances and sentences to be the same thing. Instead, he believed that sentences did not always indicate a change of speech subject, so they would not automatically satisfy all of the four utterance properties since a sentence exists as a grammatical language unit, while an utterance is entirely "ethical" in nature. Utterances are intentional because they imply an understanding between the listener and speaker that is either good or bad. To better understand, Volosinov (1973) offered an assessment of Bakhtin’s linguistic focus on the pragmatic appeal of utterances in spoken language. Bakhtin was said to reject formalized, linguistic analyses of sentence structures. This informal approach of utterances suggested a stage of passive, formal, nonresponsive literal understanding in terms of the sentence-syntax that occurs *before* utterances are placed in context. However, relevant perception of most utterances still requires one to consider the source.

For his part, Grice (1989) posited that any utterance automatically addresses someone in order to convey some presumed importance of optimal relevance. In this way, meaningful utterances become implicit as intended communication; however, as might be expected, implicit interpretations are left largely to the communicators themselves and to the heuristics, or mental “shorthand” interlocutors consider using. Sometimes this interchange is mismanaged by one or both parties with disastrous or hilarious effect. Grice’s (1989) four maxims of speech communication are supposed to show how most utterances are to be understood. These maxims include the following.

- 1.) *Quantity*: Provide the right amount of information needed for that conversation.
- 2.) *Quality*: Provide information that is true, not contradictory.
- 3.) *Relation*: Provide information that is relevant to the topic at hand.
- 4.) *Manner*: Give order to utterances throughout a conversation, to provide clarity.

To understand how these simple maxims may be used to comedic effect, an example may be found Woody Allen's 1977 film "*Annie Hall*". In one scene, Allen's character "*Alvy Singer*" swears to his long-suffering therapist that everyone is anti-semitic since "*Alvy*" was repeatedly asked the question "*Jew?*" In fact the real question was "*Did you?*" The liaison of the two words in an utterance forms the alleged misunderstanding. In written form, it is nearly impossible to imagine. This set-up would be rather incomprehensible and unfunny since it would have to be explained in order to maintain relevance.

Direct attempts at comedy are often dependent on a real misunderstanding between two or more parties in a real or supposed dialogue. This lack of verbal understanding may extend beyond the so-called "fourth wall" that exists between an audience and the comedians. Due to the proliferation of on-line *memes*, *gif's* and *vines*, comedy has reverted to its earlier forms of visual parody and misdirection. However, there are notable exceptions to what constitutes comedic potential through utterances. The classic comedy routine about baseball "'Who' is On First" by Abbott and Costello is a marvelous example of this form of comic misdirection and misappropriation through utterance. Such utterances offer meaning that is beyond words and phrases in and of themselves. What is meant is contextual and how it is said influences the accepted meaning. Listeners are expected to make their own inferences about what is uttered in order to interpret what the speaker intends. The pragmatic notion of the "*Who?*", the "*Where?*", and the "*When?*" are every bit as important as the circumstances surrounding the verbal exchange.

Pragmatics investigates "how more gets communicated than is said" (Yule, 1996, p. 3). Utterance conveys implicature in some sort of context so that the implication of what is said is achieved once an utterance is understood by the listener. According to Sperber and Wilson (2004), implicature occurs when all utterances are encountered in some context. In addition, the notion of "*manifestness*" happens when something is "grasped either consciously or unconsciously by a person" (p. 607) and then understood.

According to Mendelsohn (1994), there are several effective strategies available for determining the manifest meaning of an utterance, regardless of the source. Each one of these strategies provides a possible explanation as to why humor may be easily found in the focus characters used to illustrate this study. The first determination strategy focuses para-linguistically on the stress and un-stress of the spoken utterance. This seems easier said than done since utterances are rarely full sentences. The emotional tone would offer the greatest possibility of insight to the listener. For example, if this tone was, say, stuck in a perpetual moment of never-ending anger, it would be impossible to discern meaning in whatever utterances come forth.

The second strategy may be used to determine a given cultural reference implied as part of the utterance. Utterances may be proverbial due to their idiomaticity, idiosyncraticity, or seemingly erratic patterns of social-discourse. One of the longest running television shows in America is "*The Simpson's*". Anyone wanting to fathom what is said had better bone up on such peculiarly specific utterances as "*D'Oh!!!*", "*Woo-hoo!*", and Maggie Simpson's all-purpose ("*pacifier suck*"). As a result, these discourse markers may be as clear as mud to the unsuspecting listener, yet recognizable to any die-hard fan. The third strategy is to make a point of determining the existing cultural schemata and world knowledge that are delineated by the discourse markers pro-offered. This strategy has become almost untenable since the streetwise "urban dictionary", "slanguage", techno-babble, post-truth jargon, and constant hipster in-jokes of pundits, proselytizers make keeping the "discourse marker scorecard" nigh-on impossible to do.

Therefore, in an attempt to illustrate how and why utterance can still be used to characterize pop-cultural icons, I have chosen three of my favorite cultural icons to help me in this pursuit. These are guys with much to say and very little to declare. Although it seems very much like the premise of a joke, the pop-culture characters of "*Tonto*", "*Tarzan*", and "*Frankenstein's Monster*" are known to say what they mean and to mean what they say. They are pragmatically challenged and given to clipped speech, guttural exhortations, pidgin, and out-and-out grammatically incorrect, mono-syllabic musings. After all, even if you are to listen carefully to what each of these characters may say in the course of their delivery, something would almost always be lost in translation. No doubt, the listener would require some sort of interpreter just to make sense of it all. Although comical when joined in unison, it should be noted that the original "*Frankenstein's Monster*" of Mary Shelley's novel is actually an articulate and sentient mass of decaying flesh, as opposed to his (its) later cinematic depiction by Boris Karloff and others as bereft of regular speech.

Likewise, Edgar Rice Burroughs' "Tarzan" (aka "John Clayton -- Lord Greystoke") is also represented in a similar dysfunctional manner on celluloid despite his being quite articulate in the literary versions since he clearly prefers to listen and carefully observe before speaking. In the *Tarzan* pulp novels, the "apeman" never speaks in the kind of broken English depicted in movie versions. "Tonto" may be excused his ignorance of polished English since it is decidedly not his mother tongue – he is of either Comanche or Apache blood.

It is not by accident that these three fictional characters were chosen to form a trio with great comedic effect. They were selected from the pop-culture landscape because each one offers listeners a distinct listening challenge due to their unique form of "utterances". Their use of utterance is absolutely integral to the portrayal of these three "utters". The trio illustrate of continual or purported utterances known as "performative utterances". Austin (1962) considered performative utterances to be the kind of statements which neither describes nor reports anything, whether "true" or "false". For example, when "*Frankenstein's Monster*" growls "Fire, no good!", Tarzan declares himself to be "*King of the Jungle*" by belting out a hearty yodel, or *the Lone Ranger's* faithful Indian companion "Tonto" says, "Ummm...what you say!". Their collective utterances are simply performing an action which is not normally described as saying "something, or anything".

Tarzan, Tonto and Frankenstein's Monster

Edgar Rice Burroughs' literary "Tarzan" debuted in 1912 in "*Tarzan of the Apes*". However, it is Johnny Weissmuller's cinematic portrayal that provides one of cinema's most recognizable utterances, "The Tarzan 'Yell'" in no less than 12 movies. The yell combined a guttural war-cry, an animal call, a yodel, a territorial claim, and all-purpose outrage. Even his rather feminine mate, "Jane", and his offspring "Boy" used knock-off "yells" to express themselves for a variety of similar purposes. The "Tarzan" yell proved so popular that it has been parodied for seeming comic effect anytime and anywhere someone swings on a rope or vine, acts like a simian, or wants to go completely "native". The utterance "*Me Tarzan, You Jane!*" is arguably the second most recognizable utterance attributable to Tarzan after the yell. This expression was used by Tarzan to make a self-introduction to his future mate, Jane Porter. Ironically, the words never occurred in any of the films, or in Burroughs' many novels. It is easy to imagine, "*Him Tarzan, Him Funny!*"

The character of "Tonto" first appeared in Fran Stryker's 1933 weekly radio program on WXYZ entitled "*Tonto, the Faithful Indian Companion*". His principal duty from the very beginning was to provide the main character "*The Lone Ranger*" with someone to speak to in moments of exposition, other than his fiery steed "*Trigger*". "Tonto" typically spoke in a sort of clipped Pidgin English, and served as a cultural stereotype of how indigenous people "really" spoke. Tonto served as the indigenous foil to "*The Masked Man's*" rapier wit.

Finally, one of the stranger aspects of the film portrayal of the "*Frankenstein's Monster*" when compared to the literary source material is that in the original, the Monster is fully capable of reasoned speech, sarcasm, and sensibility. In every film version of *Frankenstein*, the *Monster* growls, howls, and is generally incomprehensible to everyone but Dr. Frankenstein's evil henchman "Ygor". That character turns out to be similarly "vocally challenged" since his neck was previously broken in a botched hanging attempt by the local authorities. Director Mel Brooks made the classic comedy "*Mel Brooks' Young Frankenstein*" (1974) and centered the entire movie's comedic premise on the utter ridiculousness of Peter Boyle's "*Creature*" singing the 1929 Irving Berlin classic "*Puttin' on the Ritz*" entirely through growls, howls, hoots and bellows. This film is set up on the basic comedy platform upon which utterance is over-ripe for comedy.

The Comedic Trifecta: Comic Possibility and Pop-cultural Icons

The pop-culture trio of "Tonto", "Tarzan" and "*Frankenstein's Monster*" finally had their comedic debut on the popular *Saturday Night Live* program of December 19, 1987, and then appeared sporadically throughout the early 1990's. The three fictional characters were joined since they were all well-known for their supposed inability to speak, let alone sing or recite poetry, in English. "Tonto" (Jon Lovitz) and "Tarzan" (Kevin Nealon) uttered words, poetics and lyrics in broken English, consistently leaving out certain verbs and pronouns for immediate comedic effect. Like those before him, the character of "*Frankenstein's Monster*" (Phil Hartman) simply growled and moaned, without any semblance intelligible speech, making the act complete and incomprehensible. Only his two like-minded friends really knew for sure what he meant.

Conclusion

People who are engaged in making inferential communications usually have some starting point since they have a shared notion of relevance in their minds from the outset. This notion will cause each person to interact in order to arrive at some presumption of relevance (Sperber, & Wilson, 1987). The presumption of relevance is supplied by the implicit messages and shared cultural schemata that are relevant enough to be worth bothering to process; or, the speaker will be as economical as they possibly can be in the process of communicating. It is in both of these points that the real humor lies.

Imagine that the speaker is completely unconcerned with whether or not the listener shares the intended message. That message may be impaired by any number of inhibitors: radioactive rage, a lack of functional vocal chords, a lack of a mouth, a dysfunctional brain, victimization by cultural stereotype, or the ignominy of being a real “monster”.

Ironically, every character discussed as part of this paper has found some real remedy for communicating effectively. The simple act of “acting out” serves its purpose through violence and destruction. “Cuteness” and “sweetness” certainly seem to overcome any emotional defense mechanisms. The soulful, baleful, or just plain slow-burn of the comic foil is a tried and true way to get a laugh. We laugh out loud in equal measures of pathos and bathos, but with the express notion that we do not have to “suffer in silence”.

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