

HUMOR IN THE COMIC SERIALS *BALADA KAMPUNG RIWIL*

Mytha Candria¹

¹Departemen Linguistik, Fakultas Ilmu Budaya, Universitas Diponegoro, Jl. dr. Antonius Suroyo, Kampus Universitas Diponegoro, Tembalang Semarang 50274

*Corresponding author: mythacandria@live.undip.ac.id

Abstract *Humor is a universal human phenomenon that is culturally bounded. As an instance of expressive culture, humor communicates a set of beliefs and thoughts held by and shared in a community. This is the reason humor has for recent decades attracted the attention of anthropologists. A lot of humors are expressed in verbal language, and in this way linguistics, particularly pragmatics, provides an analytical tool to understand the meanings of humor. Humorous utterances in this study were taken from episode 118, entitled “Dyah Puspa Jaladri#1”, of a Javanese comic serial Balada Kampung Riwil. The data were analyzed using Grice’s Cooperative Principle to reveal the meanings behind the humor. The result shows that amusing effects arise when Grice’s maxims are intentionally flouted and humor in the serial serves various functions.*

Keyword:

Humour, expressive culture, Javanese, *Balada Kampung Riwil*

Article Info

Received: 28 May 2023

Accepted: 12 Jun 2023

Published: 16 Jun 2023

1. Introduction

Humor or laughter is a “part of the semantic field of the comic that in turn belongs to the domain of expressive culture” (Driessen, 2015:416). This suggests that humor, like other instances of expressive culture, forms an integral part of human everyday life, which is why humor has the potential to open the gates to understanding the worldviews and practices of a community of people. In other words, humor provides invaluable insights to anthropologists and those interested in studying culture and society.

Humor is universal yet culturally bounded (Driessen, 2015; Apte, 1985). Its existence in the lives of people worldwide is unquestionable, but its forms, functions, and meanings differ from one group of people to another, from one culture to another. The cultural-specific nature humor has makes it untranslatable (Driessen, 2015), for, while translation can transfer the meaning humor carries, it cannot transfer the culture that a specific group of people holds. An American joke, for example, may not be amusing or funny for Indonesians, and vice versa, an Indonesian laughter may not make sense for Americans.

In general, humor takes “sex, food, health, death, the stranger, and lunatic” as its topics (Driessen, 2015:416). Its functions, however, are not always clear-cut. They range from entertainment, cultural critique, social control, social bonding, social critique, to hidden resistance (Driessen, 2015:416; Kuipers, 2016; Besnier, 2016). Thus, to study humor, a

researcher must carefully examine the context in which the humor is produced. In Java, Indonesia, for instance, 'mild jokes' or 'benign humor' (Driessen, 2015) is used to entertain, break the ice, or maintain social relations. However, in some cases, the Javanese uses comic utterances to criticize improper attitudes, behavior, or conducts. The various functions humor play among the people of Java can be observed in Javanese comic serials *Balada Kampung Riwil* or *Bakar*. *Balada Kampung Riwil*, literally meaning the Ballad of Riwil Kampong, is produced by a group of young Javanese artists, living in Ngipang, Kadipiro, Banjarsari, Surakarta, Indonesia (Afriadi, 2021). '*Riwil*', the name of the kampong, is a Javanese adjective meaning fussy, choosy, picky, or troublesome (Stevens, 2004); the word *riwil* is ambiguous in that it refers to both the name of the kampong and the characters of the inhabitants.

The actors and actresses of *Bakar* comedy are performers of traditional Javanese play, popularly known as *kethoprak*, but the long-term COVID-19 pandemic, together with the locked down policy of the government of Indonesia, prevented them from performing the play in the usual way (Bramantoro, 2020). This motivated them to innovate, shifting the stage play of *kethoprak* to a digital You Tube platform; *Bakar* sitcom was first aired in April 2020 and has since then consistently been produced and showed in You Tube channel. Presented in Javanese language, the serials recount the day-to-day interactions of ordinary people who live in a modest life in Kampong Riwil. The comic serials has since its very first premiere won the heart of thousand viewers, many of whom comment on every episode positively.

The characters frequently exchange jokes, which are simple, harmless, yet fresh and unpredictable. They mostly exploit linguistic devices to create laughter. Hence, to understand the meanings of their jokes, linguistic pragmatics is utilized as the main approach, based on the consideration that it is pragmatics that investigates speaker meaning. *Bakar* comedy has thus far not been studied pragmatically, so I decide to analyze it, focusing on its use of humorous utterances, using pragmatics as the approach and Grice's Cooperative Principle as the theoretical framework. However, a cultural analysis of humor is also necessary to understand the functions of the jokes.

The research problem is formulated into the following questions:

1. How does maxim flouting incite laughter?
2. What are the maxims flouted by Bakar characters to produce humorous effects?
What are the meanings behind the maxim flouting?
3. What are the functions of the humor?

Based on the questions, I formulate the objectives of the paper as follows:

1. To discover if Grice's CP offers adequate theoretical framework to understand the sitcom wits;
2. To figure out whether flouting maxims can raise humorous effects in the reader and to discover the maxims flouted by the characters so as to incite laughter;
3. To explain the implicature(s) and thus the meaning(s) produced by flouting Grice's conversational maxims, and the functions of the humor.

2. Methods

This research is qualitative in nature, meaning that reality (humor, its functions, and its meanings) is seen as plural, heterogenous, and holistic. Reality is plural and heterogenous because they are very much context dependent; it cannot be understood comprehensively or

holistically apart from its context, and different contexts lead to different interpretations of reality.

The approach used to analyze the data is pragmatics, and the pragmatic framework used is Grice's Cooperative Principle. A cultural study of humor is also used to understand the functions of humor (Driessen, 2015).

Grice's CP suggests that "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (Yule, 1996:37). The principle is specified into four conversational maxims, which are Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. These conversational maxims are detailed into (Yule, 1996:37):

1. Quantity
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
2. Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Relation: Be relevant.
4. Manner: Be perspicuous.
 - a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - b. Avoid ambiguity
 - c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - d. Be orderly

People, however, do not always adhere to Grice's conversational maxims for various reasons, such as to generate the so-called conversational implicature, to fool others, or to follow cultural prescription. This non-observance of the maxims can be classified into 1) maxim flouting, 2) violating maxim, 3) infringing maxim, 4) opting out of maxim, and 5) suspending maxim (Thomas, 2013).

An individual is said to flout a maxim when she intentionally disobeys a maxim because she wants the hearer to draw a conclusion (an implicature) other than that said in her utterance. In flouting a maxim, a speaker has no intention to mislead or lie to the hearer.

In contrast, maxim violation occurs when a speaker fail to adhere to a conversational maxim with the intention to mislead or deceive the hearer (Thomas, 2013). Maxim violation is thus, borrowing the words of Jenny Thomas (Thomas, 2013:74), "pragmatically misleading" or "potentially pragmatically misleading".

Maxim infringing occurs when a speaker fails to obey a maxim not because she wants to generate an additional meaning from her utterance or because she wants to deceive her hearer. Infringing maxim occurs when a speaker unsuccessfully obeys a maxim due to inadequate language mastery or linguistic impairment (Thomas, 2013).

"A speaker opts out of observing a maxim by indicating unwillingness to cooperate in the way the maxim requires" (Thomas, 2013:74). The speaker refuses to cooperate mainly because of legal or ethical reasons, but it may well be the case that she refuses to provide the information requested because it potentially hurts a third party (Thomas, 2013).

The last type of an individual's failure to observe a maxim is that of suspending maxim. Suspending maxim is a cultural phenomenon first proposed by Keenan (in Thomas, 2013).

Keenan discovered that in Malagasy culture, people are expected to withhold information to some extent; they should not provide the hearer with information as much as requested. This Malagasy tradition is in contrast to Grice's Quantity Maxim, in which a speaker is expected to be as informative as is required.

Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) has been variously used to analyze humor in different cultures. Mubarakah, Djatmika, and Sumarlam (2019) conduct research on Javanese humor delivered in a wedding ceremony. They discover that to raise humorous effects in the hearer, the speaker flouted, violated, infringed, opted out, and suspended Grice's cooperative maxims. The flouting of Quantity Maxim is the one the speaker mostly did to incite laughter. In this case, the speaker intentionally provided less information than was required to amuse his audience. American or English verbal humor, as Weng (2021) and Pan (2012) put it, achieves its humorous effects by violating Grice's Maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Weng (2021), however, underlines two important findings of his: first, American humor makes pervasive use of lexical and syntactic ambiguity, and second, Americans use such figures of speech as metaphors, hyperbole, and irony to enliven their humors. Hence, in terms of American verbal humor, two of Grice's maxims that are mostly violated are Manner and Quality Maxims.

3. Result and Discussion

The data for this paper were taken from *Bakar* comedy episode 118, entitled "Dyah Puspa Jaladri #1" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3A3VJ2AxP8>). The episode was chosen because it is rich in historical and cultural values, highlighting the persistence and commitment of Indonesian national heroine of Javanese origin, Ratu Kalinyamat. Premiered on November, 21st, 2021, the video has thus far got 484,062 views and 12,000 likes. From the video, there are 27 humorous utterances, all of which are maxim flouting and they are classified as follows:

MAXIM FLOUTING			
Quantity	Quality	Relation	Manner
I	IIII IIII	IIII IIII	IIII
		II	
1	9	12	5

Table 1. Maxim Floutings in Bakar Sitcom

Here, I did not take into account power relations, distance, and formality, as all the humours are articulated in informal situations and in fluid, egalitarian contexts. I, therefore, focus my attention on the maxim flouting and the resulted humorous effects. In addition, I analyse the functions of the jokes within Indonesian cultural context.

3.1. Flouting Quantity Maxim

Bu Siti : *Momon karo Minthul ki pancen ora seneng 'ok yen aku dadi public figure.*

Momon : *Public figure niku menapa ta, Bu?*

Bu Siti : ***Public figure iku balane Agnes Monica!***

Maxim flout in the preceding verbal exchange arises because Bu Siti, literally meaning Ma'am Siti, does not sufficiently or informatively answer Momon's tease, while Grice's Maxim of Quantity suggests otherwise. Here, Bu Siti may not really know what a public figure is; she says the clause (public figure *iku balane Agnes Monica*) simply to counter Momon and Minthul's opinions that she is not competent enough to play the role of Ratu Kalinyamat at Kampong Riwil's incoming *kethoprak* performance.

Her flouting of the Quantity Maxim incites laughter because her answer is a simplification. Yet, it is beyond anyone's expectation. As an old kampong woman, Bu Siti is not at all comparable to Agnes Monica, a famous and talented Indonesian singer. She, however, wants to be as famous as Agnes Monica anyway.

Another form of effect this utterance produce is that it is not informative in the sense that the term 'public figure' covers people a lot larger than just a singer as Agnes Monica, since 'public figure' refers to individuals who are famous due to their work, and they frequently appear on national or international media, such as television, radio, magazines, etc. Yet, Bu Siti limits the term public figure only to those of Agnes Monica's companions (*balane Agnes Monica*).

Bu Siti's answer, trivial as it may seem, criticizes unjust situations in Indonesia. In reality, Bu Siti and Agnes Monica are both performers or artists. However, Bu Siti is an artist working in preserving traditional Javanese culture, while Agnes Monica is part of the so-called popular culture. Bu Siti lives in the small city of Surakarta in modest life, while Agnes lives a modern and wealthy life in Indonesia's capital city of Jakarta. While both are performers and artists, they have very different fates and lifestyles. As a traditional Javanese artist, Bu Siti is not famous among Indonesians, since traditional culture does not attract the attention of the government and people of Indonesia. In contrast, popular culture, represented by Agnes Monica and identified with modernity, wins the heart of a large number of Indonesians, especially the youth. Here, Bu Siti's joke functions as a means to highlight the dilemma that many Indonesian traditional performers have to experience.

3.2. Flouting Quality Maxim

The succeeding verbal exchange involves three characters, Bogang, Momon, and Minthul. Bogang is older than Momon and Minthul, who are contemporaries. Yet the exchange is quite fluid, as their relation is close and they are conversing in informal, relaxed situation. Bogang and Momon are casual workers in Mintul's mother's (Bu Siti's) small business laundry.

The talk begins with Momon's flouting of the Quantity Maxim, for he clearly refuses to provide Bogang with adequate information that Bogang asks. "*Ana perlu*" is a common excuse Javanese people say when they refuse to or fail to fill an invitation but are reluctant to provide the specific details of their absence. The real reasons of their rejection or absence may vary, one of which is laziness.

Bogang : *Mau bengi kok ora melu rapat, neng ndi, ta, Mon?*

Momon : *Ana perlu.*

Mintul : *Perlu apa? Turu kuwi 'ok.*

Bogang : *Wah kebangeten kowe, Mon. Lha, sing sepuh-sepuh wae budhal rapat kok. Kowe cah enom, kok, malah turu!*

Momon : *Heh, sing turu ki sapa?*

- Mintul* : *Halah, sak repot-repote sampeyan, yen aku WA ki mesti kok wales. Yen ora mbales yo mesti turu kuwi 'ok!*
- Bogang* : *Nha, berarti turu!*
- Momon* : *Heh, aku ki ana perlu yo!*
- Bogang* : *Perlu ki, perlu apa?*
- Momon* : ***Nggarap skripsi.*** (Then Momon laughed)

The dialogue ends comically with Momon's statement *nggarap skripsi*, from which we can draw an implicature that he wants Bogang and Minthul to mind their own business and stop interfering on his. Momon, however, could not openly say to them to mind their own business, which would surely offend them. This is because, for a Javanese, to say directly to others to mind their own business is a face threatening act. Thereby, Momon flouts Quality Maxim by intentionally saying something untrue. There is no way he writes *skripsi*, for he is not a college student, who is obliged to write a *skripsi* or student final project. Momon is in fact a laborer.

For the viewer, it is very likely that the comical effect is produced by Momon's unexpected reply. None of the viewer would expect him to respond to Bogang's insistence using such an academic term as *nggarap skripsi*. This is because Momon's attitude, physical appearance, clothes, and work do not support the idea of his being educated or intelligent. He is in fact busy picking up dry clothes, wearing t-shirt and pants, when saying *nggarap skripsi*. This contrast between his spontaneous response and his appearance and activities is what produces a startling effect in the viewers.

Culturally speaking, Momon's humor serves to release tensions that he created by not fulfilling his obligations as a community member. In other words, his comic answer is used to smooth the social relations that is somehow disruptive because of his improper act. On the other hand, the joke can be considered to be part of his criticism to the Javanese people who always want to know other people's business. He wants to remind his interlocutors (Bogang and Minthul) to mind their own business in a polite and mild way.

3.3. Flouting Relation Maxim

Relation Maxim is the conversational maxim that is flouted the most by the characters in *Bakar* situational comedy. This is because the characters frequently produce irrelevant utterances or responses to raise comical effects in the reader. The following conversation between Pak RT, Bu RT, and Iis serves as an example. Iis is one of the people of Kampong Riwil who is asked to join the incoming *kethoprak* play. She is unhappy because she really wants to play the role of Ratu Kopi at the incoming *kethoprak* play, but, before the rehearsal, the director (*sutradara*) of the *kethoprak*, Bandi, changes her role to become *Emban Pencit*.

- Iis* : *Bu RT, kula kok mboten sida dadi Ratu Kopi niku pripun to?*
- Bu RT* : *Aku ya ora ngerti, Is. Kan sutradarane Bandi.*
- Iis* : *Lha, kok, wingi njengengan ngendhika yen kula dadi Ratu Kopi?*
- Bu RT* : *Aku lak mung usul to, Is, tapi sing nentokke rak Bandi. Wong sutradarane Bandi.*
- Iis* : ***Kok mboten njenengan mawon ingkang dados sutradara? Ben kula dadi Ratu Kopi.***

The last utterance is irrelevant for it does not follow the flow of the conversation, in

which Bu RT, as well as Pak RT, tries to explain to Iis that the director of the *kethoprak* play is Bandi. Iis, however, insists on she is playing at the *kethoprak* as Ratu Kopi instead of Emban Pencit. Thus, instead of listening to and accepting Bu RT's explanation, she changes the direction of the conversation to suit her personal goal.

The humor here lies in the fact that Iis wants a change in the role of *sutradara* as if it was an easy thing to do. This is surely not true because the role of a play director needs competence and skills. However, Iis, out of disappointment and anger, proposes her own opinion.

3.4. Flouting Manner Maxim

Grice's Manner Maxim suggests that a cooperative speaker avoids ambiguity when conversing. However, in *Bakar sitcom*, there are five occasions when the characters flout Manner Maxim to generate humor. This kind of humor is mainly that which exploits lexical ambiguity. For example, after reading Kampong Riwil's Whatsapp Group concerning *kethoprak* rehearsal, Paijo and Fandra, the only two children playing in the sitcom, say: "*Tabung ijo. Gas!*" *Tabung ijo*, literally meaning green gas scuba, is identified with its content, i.e. gas. Here, however, Fandra and Paijo use the word ambiguously, since gas can refer to both gas that is used to cook or the gas, which is a symbol of acceleration in a car. The boys use *gas* to mean their willingness and readiness to join the *kethoprak* rehearsal.

Another form of Manner Maxim flout is done by Paijo when he asks Fandra, "*Iwak, iwak apa sing ora isa obah?*" and it turns out to be that the answer to the question is *iwak paus*. Paijo equates Paus with pause, which means to stop an activity, an action, or a recording.

4. Conclusion

The result shows that the characters of *Bakar* comic serials flout all of Grice's conversational maxims to produce humor. However, Relation and Quality Maxims are the two that are flouted the most. Relation Maxim is flouted since in several occasions the characters produce irrelevant comments so as to be funny, while Quality Maxim is flouted, for they intentionally say things that are untrue to incite laughter. Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Maxims have thus far provided valuable resource to analyze humor in *Bakar* serials. The difficulty with the framework, however, is that it does not provide possibilities for a humor to have more than one interpretation or implicature, while it is very likely that a humorous utterance leads the audience to several possible interpretations.

Concerning the functions of humor that the *Bakar* characters produce, there is no single functions applicable to their humors. Again, as Driessen previously mentions, there is no clear-cut functions of humor. It may serve as a means to entertain, to distance people from the adversity of life. In general, it may be said that this is the function of *Bakar* humorous statements, but, in addition to its entertaining effects, the humors also criticizes the social situation in Indonesia.

References

- Afriadi, A. 2021. Bupati Karanganyar main film, ini linknya! Karanganyar News. 2021 29 December 2021.
- Apte, M.L. 1985. An Anthropological Approach. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.
- Besnier, N. 2016. Humour and Humility: Narratives of Modernity on Nukulaelae Atoll. *Etnofoor*. 2016;28(1):75-95.

- Bramantoro T. 2020. Kebo nyusu gugel. pertunjukan seni virtual di tengah pandemi. Tribunnewscom. 2020 19 November.
- Driessen, H. 2015. Anthropology of Humor. In: Wright JD, editor. International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences. 2 ed. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Kuipers, G. 2016. Follow the Joke: Humour and Ethnography. *Etnofoor*. 2016;28(2):125-9.
- Mirivel, J.C. 2015. Cooperative Principle. In: Tracy K, Ilie C, Sandel T, editors. The International Encyclopedia of Language and Social Interaction, First Edition. 1st ed. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Mubarokah, Q & Djatmika, et.al. 2019. Cooperative principle violations to create laughter at wedding ceremony in Magetan. *Lingua Cultura*. 2019;13(3):231-7.
- Pan, W. 2012. Linguistic Basis of Humor in Uses of Grice's Cooperative Principle. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*. 2012;1(6):20-5.
- Stevens, A.M & Schmidgall-Tellings, A.E. 2004. A Comprehensive Indonesian-English Dictionary. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.
- Thomas, J. 2013. Meaning in interaction: An introduction to pragmatics. London and New York: Routledge.
- Weng, Y. 2021. A study of American verbal humor in the Big Bang Theory from the perspective of Cooperative Principle. *Academic Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences*. 2021;4(7):98-104.
- Yule, G. 1996. Pragmatics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.