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FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY

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SITCOMS, APPEAL AND COGNITION

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the role and place of the genre of the situation comedy, or the sitcom, and the processes of appeal and cognition as central to foreign language and culture acquisition. Drawing on the specific narrative format of the sitcom and the theoretical claims that emotion and affect are precursors of appeal and cognition in language learning, this paper uncovers a specific characteristic of the sitcom as both a medium and a tool for learning a foreign language and acquiring cultural content. It shows a unique link between the narrative of the sitcom and the learning process. The study forms a starting point for more detailed examination of the above processes and the actual learning input and influence of the sitcom aided by its appealing effect resulting in cognitive function.

Keywords: *sitcoms; language acquisition, appeal, cognition*

1. Introduction

The genre of the situation comedy, or the sitcom, is a multifaceted arena of investigation that has been until recently neglected lacking the attention from various scientific fields such as film, media, narrative and cultural studies. Moreover, the genre that has been part of media production and viewers' attention for almost a century offers a broad field of investigation in different spheres of social, artistic and cultural life globally. It holds a unique place and role into shaping the world of media and culture as a result. It is the actors' talent and ability to deliver the character that further influences how the sitcom will be adopted. Furthermore, while these encounters with the foreign language and culture are in an informal setting, the acquisition of the content is undisputable.

Situation comedies enable the experience to virtually have the language and the culture at the disposal of the learner. The cultural-linguistic offer is wide and long but perfectly packed in humorous little predicaments of their likable characters. Due to its abundant potential, the sitcom can be explored through various lenses (aesthetic, narrative, commercial and ideological) and the new lenses proposed here, that of the connection between the sitcom, its cultural appeal and the viewers' cognition. "The

sitcom differs in that its central tensions – embarrassment and guilt – are almost always alleviated before the end of an episode. Each episode may appear to resemble a short, self-contained play its rigid confinement to an electronic approximation of a proscenium-arch theater complete with laughter and applause, emphasizes this link.” (Walker, A, 1998, p.254). The sitcom is a piece of television program designed to lift the spirits. If TV was designed for that in the first place, the sitcom is the paramount of TV entertainment. They give people mirrored reality of what they encounter during the day by relieving the burden of their real lives. “Unlike a stage play, however, no single episode of a sitcom is likely to be of much interest; it may not even be intelligible. The attraction of an episode is the strength of its contribution to the broader cosmology of the series.” (Walker, A., 1998, p.254). In the sitcom, a whole cycle is completed at the end of the story, but, as its character proposes the sitcom automatically reverses everything to square one. In this way, hope and curiosity are once again restored. “Trivia is the salient form of sitcom appreciation, of any television series.” (Walker, A, 1998, p.254). To this end, in this paper, the concepts of appeal and cognition are explored as markers for the sitcom’s abiding role in foreign language and culture acquisition. We give a theoretical framework to serve the purpose of further study of the sitcom narrative and its application. These concepts are illustrative of the of the processes central to the cultural and linguistic resonance of the genre of the sitcom. Further theoretical approaches that examine the relation between language, culture and thought, linguistic speech acts, translation studies, listening and speaking skills and the linguacultural are also key to the wide range of sitcom’s linguistic and cultural application. This paper opens up the discussion with beginner processes of appeal and cognition.

2. Appeal and cognition of the sitcom

To add to its innate diversity as diverse as life can be, the focuses of the sitcom vary. The sitcoms not all equally concerned with sending the same message, For example, “though didacticism may be a structural feature of the sitcom (and all storytelling), a strain of situation comedy has developed that is less emphatically moralistic and more concerned with being funny” (Walker, A, 1998, p.,258). Furthermore, the most lasting appeal of the sitcom lies with the chemistry between the actors on the stage and the chemistry they create with the audience. “For all the stylistic variations on a theme that have characterized sitcom history, the comic success of a show ultimately has depended on the talents of its actors and their collaborative success as a troupe” (Walker, A 1998, p.260). The motivations to become a dedicated viewer, to follow the development of the sitcom world making, can also vary. Inevitably, the motivations correlate with the personal worldmaking of the viewer and the ideological postulates behind the storyline, no matter how subtle and vague they might seem.

The ideology of the situation comedy is an interesting contrast to the idea of the American dream as one of achievement, opportunity, growth, mobility. Here such volatility is seen only as threat, as a dream which cannot be realized, which creates only conflict and disappointment. The characters are encouraged to accept their lot, to 'let it be', to replace ambition with the solace of love, friendship and the promise that in a limited, static way everything will work out all right eventually. (Walker, A, 1998, p.276)

Finally, "sitcom ideology reconciles the viewer, as well as the character, to a social situation in which vertical mobility is a dream unlikely to be realized, in which chance is merely threat, in which domestic tranquility is the highest ideal." (Walker, A, 1998, p.276). It shows a shift from strict and rigid portrayal of the good and happy life, to the acceptance of the calm satisfying life of the middle-class. There lies the significance of the sitcom as both a social commentator, personal adviser and an ideological forerunner.

These are the structural characteristics of the sitcom where the whole appeal lies. As purveyor of mutual understanding emblazoned with humor the sitcom contributes to a national and international understanding of culture in all its aspects. All this information is then devoured by the faithful public. Consequently, the cultural and linguistic acquisition in this process is inevitably and effectively implemented. The sitcom's brevity, topic, setting and humorous storyline contribute to the effect of it on the audience's cultural and linguistic cognition. The cognitive process is established firstly through the emotions they experience when encountering the sitcom narrative. Similarly, when listening to a song/melody of different genres or cultures, people are first taken by emotion. Emotions occur unconsciously and mostly happen before the thought (which can come consciously, subconsciously or unconsciously). Feelings come after emotions and they in turn cause thought to process and react on them. Exploring emotions therefore and their role in processing a narrative content influences individual's views, beliefs, their resistance or openness to modifications. This stance is given in *Affect in Social Thinking and Behavior*, Ed. Joseph P Forgas, stating that *affect* predetermines the mood, the emotion and the cognition.

"Most contemporary affect-cognition approaches in social psychology also assume explicitly or implicitly, that affect is part of a single, integrated cognitive representational system, at least in the sense that the experience of an emotion is a cognition (Lairde&Breslet, 1991, p.4)" (In Forgas, 2012, p.6).

One accepted approach might be to define *affect* as a broad, generic and inclusive term that refers to a variety of specific affective states including both *moods* and *emotions* (Forgas 1995, 2002). *Moods* in turn may be defined as relatively low-intensity, diffuses, subconscious and enduring affective states that have no salient antecedent cause and therefore little cognitive content (such as feeling generally good

or bad). In contrast, distinct *emotions* are more short-lived, conscious and intense; usually have a highly accessible and salient cause, and clear, prototypical cognitive content (eg. disgust, anger or fear). Both emotions and moods do have an influence on social thinking and behaviour, but the nature of that influence may be quite different and mediated by different cognitive mechanisms. (Forgas, 2012, p.6)

Most importantly, to confirm the idea that the sitcom is the virtual real-life environment for the viewers and has the effect of delivering language and culture in a virtually direct way, “according to all available evidence, there is clearly a bidirectional link between affect and cognition” (Forgas 2012, p.6). On another socio and psycholinguistic level, studies have “demonstrated that the effects of cross-linguistic influences are not monolithic but vary to a great extent depending on the social context of the language contact situation” (Kecskes&Papp, 2000, p.xii). This is related with the so called “foreign language effect”, when a foreign language influences the first language use, thoughts and behavior of the learners.

“Depending on the intensity of language learning and the form of language contact (if any), the FL can affect L1 in different ways. Caskey-Sirmons and Hickson (1997) demonstrated that the meanings that words have in L1 can be influenced by L2. They examined color terms in five languages, and beyond, for instance, that a monolingual speaker of Korean uses the word *paran sekj* (in English:blue), to mean something greener and less purple than a Korean who speaks English as well” (Kecskes&Papp, 2000, p.xii). What Kecskes and Papp do is work up the term *transfer* to explain the borrowing and appropriation of grammatical and structural phenomena from L2 to L1, stating that the opposite transfer is also possible. Generally, this is analyzed within the dichotomy of two cultural and linguistic systems (L1 and L2) in two contexts one when the second language is directly present in the learner’s immediate environment and it is called second language and another combination of indirectly present “foreign language”. Sitcoms then as we claim imitate the immediate environment and thus create an in-between-space for the learners.

This agrees with our claim that the appropriation of these phenomena as well the influence on the viewer’s socio-pragmatic perceptions through the medium of the sitcoms. “There is a structural and a conceptual level of transfer: The former is dominated by similarity and the latter is affected mostly by difference. Conceptual transfer occurs at a level where cognition and language touch.” (Kecskes&Papp, 2000, p.xvi). In this sense, Kecskes and Pap (2000) distinguish two main types of transfer: one as a “linguistic systems phenomenon: when the interaction of or more language systems results in the transfer of a sound patten, lexical item or structure from one language system to the other”, and a transfer “when knowledge or skills acquired through one language system become ready to be used through the other language channel(s).” Basically, their study purports the claims that “competence in more than one language results in a kind of L1 knowledge that differs from

the L1 knowledge of monocompetent people. The difference derives from the L2 influence because the L2 and L1 are related in the mind the L2 cannot be learned as a second L1” (Kecskes&Papp, 2000, p.xviii). They further claim that second language acquisition is almost always more conscious. In our study this distinction is shifted by the combination of conscious, unconscious and subconscious acquisition of the sitcom content. Therefore, “a significant amount of cognitive development results from the internalization of interpersonal communicative processes” (Kecskes&Papp, 2000, p.xx) as our study confirms. The production and comprehension of the speech acts (as illustrated by the sitcom narrative) follow the steps of combining language use in conjunction with beliefs and context as discussed later in this study.

3. Conclusion

The genre of the sitcom influenced its varied audiences in the past and in addition to its entertaining purpose, it remains open to the linguistic and cultural functions in the present. This is all the more important at the backdrop of the digital media content and communication and the cognitive overload as a result of it. Therefore it is important to examine and address the genre of the sitcom, its role and place in the linguistic development and cultural input across generations. The above discussion in particular corroborates the proposed thesis of the sitcom at the center of appeal, and cognition and the resulting language and culture acquisition. As discussed above, the language and culture are “picked up both on a conscious and subconscious level due to the nature of the sitcom as both a source of entertainment and learning. Since culture and language are inextricably bound in the sitcom, the culture assists in the subconscious acquisition of correct pronunciation and grammar structures and vice versa, the understanding of the speech acts helps the understanding of the cultural patterns. This means that input the sitcom provides is a complex one and the response to it is manifold. The sitcom is a motion picture, an audio-visual media that provides both audible and visible context with the possibility with subtitles in the source or the target language. The viewers are invested differently in the sitcom narrative from a written text. Making conclusions about the characters, the actions and events they see acted on the scene they repeatedly hear one and the same word/phrase, memorize it and connect it with a particular context. This is effective provided the learner regularly watches a particular sitcom or sitcoms in general. The viewers gain an almost “first-hand” experience in conversational English. In this way both the appeal and the cognition are ignited and the process of learning is enabled.

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