

## Humor in Verbal Irony in the TV Series *The Office* (US)

Nabila Nurul Hasyim, Sharifah Hanidar\*

English Department, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia

\*Corresponding Author: [sharifah@ugm.ac.id](mailto:sharifah@ugm.ac.id)

### ABSTRACT

Verbal irony as a figurative language has been conceived in everyday life as its use is common when people communicate with each other. It enables the speaker to express negative intentions towards the hearer and produce humorous elements. This study aims to analyze verbal irony in the sitcom *The Office (US)* from a pragmatic perspective, which focuses on identifying its types and their manifestations in arousing humor. The data of this study were collected from *The Office (US)* Season 2, which consists of 22 episodes. They were observed, transcribed, analyzed, and classified into the categories proposed by Gibbs (2000). The utterances that contain verbal irony were marked and analyzed by applying the theory proposed by Garmendia (2007). The results show that from 97 occurrences that were identified, all five types of verbal irony (sarcasm, jocular, rhetorical question, hyperbole, and understatement) were found, with sarcasm as the most frequently used type. The analysis also revealed that the disparity that emerges from verbal irony leads to humor creation.

**Keywords:** *disparity, humor, situational comedy, verbal irony.*

### INTRODUCTION

The way people communicate will determine how the receiver understands the message and how the message is understood by the receiver. Occasionally, people might speak using figurative language that allows them to deliver a message whose actual meaning goes beyond what is said. Dews et al. (2007) state that irony is commonly used to express non-literal meaning, such as when a speaker uses a compliment to convey a negative statement (e.g., "This is very delicious" after tasting a flavorless dish) or when a speaker says something negative to actually convey a positive meaning (e.g., "You really got a bad grade." to someone who actually got an A). Colston and Gibbs (2007) mention the notions of verbal irony and situational irony. Verbal irony

refers to the contradiction in the speaker's utterances, while situational irony is a situation that seems contradictory. Because this study examines irony that is found in the speaker's utterances together with their context, the identification of verbal irony is made through a pragmatic study.

The fact that the concept of irony has been manifested in everyday life motivates people to understand it since the phenomenon cannot be conceived simply as a substitution of literal language, but there should be a motivation for someone to use it (Dews et al., 1995). When people employ irony in their speech, their remarks could function as a satirical expression depending on the situation and the speaker's intention. Furthermore, the phenomenon of irony that creates a disparity between what is said and what is intended may lead

to an unexpected condition and surprise from which humor might arise.

Humor is believed to be an important aspect of communication. Raskin (1985) argues that humor is not a rare phenomenon. In most cases, people laugh when they find something funny, although different people may not perceive the same thing as equally funny. Raskin also mentions the notions of verbal and non-verbal humor. Verbal humor refers to texts that can create humor, while non-verbal humor refers to humorous situations. A further explanation of verbal humor is provided by Attardo (2010). He suggests that humor covers the areas of linguistics, including textual linguistics, theory of narrativity, and pragmatics.

The phenomenon of humor can be found in situational comedy, which is intentionally produced to generate humor. A situation comedy, or sitcom, is defined by Merriam-Webster online dictionary as a “radio or television comedy series that involves a continuing cast of characters in a succession of episodes” (Situation comedy, n.d.). Compared with sketch comedy with new characters in the following sketch, the sitcom has fixed characters from the beginning to the end.

A sitcom is one of the sources available for researchers to conduct research on irony, focusing on creating humor. *The Office (US)* is an American mockumentary sitcom adapted from the original BBC series of the same name. Aired on NBC from March 24, 2005, to May 16, 2013, the sitcom shows the fictitious everyday life of office employees in the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company in the form of a documentary. The sitcom reached more than 11 million viewers when it debuted (Timms, 2005) and has won and been nominated for many notable awards, making it a successful sitcom. The researcher conducted a study on verbal irony found in *The Office (US)* because it is accessible and provides a convenient data source of verbal irony. Among the nine seasons, season 2, which consists of 22 episodes, was picked by *The Office Fandom* as the most favorite season, considering that it is in season 2 that the characters have been greatly developed, and conflicts start to appear.

The study of irony has attracted many scholars' attention who have conducted scientific research focusing on verbal irony. In this study, the researcher

aims to investigate not only the verbal irony but also the humor aroused from the use of verbal irony found in the sitcom, *The Office (US)* season 2.

This research addresses the following research questions:

1. Which types of verbal irony are used in *The Office (US)* Season 2?
2. How does verbal irony used by the characters in the sitcom arouse humor?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of irony has always been a field of interest for many scholars who have conducted significant academic research that range from the functions of irony, the forms of irony to the humorous goal of irony. Dews et al. (1995) provide comprehensive research to examine the use of irony in ironic remarks, ironic criticism, and ironic compliments. The study reveals that the participants rated ironic remarks as funnier than the literal version and rated ironic criticism as less offensive and more amusing than the literal ones. However, the ironic compliments were judged more offensive than the literal compliments. From the analysis, it was obtained that the speakers tend to use irony to spark humor, make an insult sound softer, show that they are in control of their emotions, and avoid damaging the relationship. A further study on the use of irony conducted by Colston (1997) shows a result that contradicts that of the previous research. He asserts that irony could enhance the level of the speaker's negative intention and that there are many instances of ironic remarks that could result in either less condemning or more condemning than the literal remarks.

Relating to the study of irony that discusses its types, Whalen, J. M, et al. (2013) conducted research in computer-mediated communication (CMC) and analyzed five types of irony in 349 blog entries selected with specific criteria. Hyperbole is used the most often in blog posts among the five types of irony (jocularly, sarcasm, rhetorical question, hyperbole, and understatement). The researchers also found that entries discussing hobbies and social outings are the topics in which most ironic languages occur, and the

use of irony is intended to convey both positive and negative meanings.

The study on irony and humor was also conducted by Roberts and Kreuz (1994), who identified the use of eight types of figurative languages, among which irony is included. Although this study did not specifically focus on irony, the result of the study indicates that the aim of using irony is to be humorous.

Izaias (2011) carried out a study on humor in irony found in the sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* by using Grice's Cooperative Principle and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. The study reveals that humor arises from the use of irony. It is also used to create humorous characters and scenes in the sitcom. Verbal irony is the most frequently used among the many types of irony used in the sitcom.

The preceding studies provide a variety of examples of research on irony. The data sources range from experiments and written texts to sitcoms. They provide a broader view of how irony is investigated in various forms, including situational comedy, which becomes the data source of this study. Unlike the previous studies, this study focuses on and investigates the types of verbal irony and how their manifestations arouse humor.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Irony has been described and explained by many scholars from different perspectives. The word *irony* derives from the Greek word, *eirōnia*, from *eirōn* meaning "dissembler" (Irony, n.d.). In the traditional view, irony is the expected event that contradicts the actual situation or a statement contradictory to the speaker's attitude (Gibbs, 1994). The traditional account of irony is also defined as a "figurative meaning opposite to the literal meaning of the utterance" (Jorgensen et al., 1984, p. 112). Along with the definitions of irony, Kreuz and Roberts (1993) classify irony into four types: Socratic irony, dramatic irony, situational irony, and verbal irony. Since this study employs a sitcom with its character's utterances, the researcher will take a more in-depth look at the notion of verbal irony.

The concepts of verbal irony have been discussed in pragmatics (Garmendia, 2007). Attardo (2000, p. 797) defines irony as "saying something while meaning something else." He then divides irony approaches into two categories: the rewording of the traditional theory of irony as a trope (figure of speech) and the language/metalanguage distinction. The theory of irony as a figure of speech comes from Brown and Levinson (1987), who explain that irony has the opposite meaning of what the speakers are saying, and Haverkate (1990), who similarly proposes irony as negation. On the other hand, Grice (1989) argues that irony is an example of implicature, in which the maxim of quality is flouted. Brown (1980; as cited in Attardo, 2010) assumes that irony is not only applied to assertions, which means that non-assertive speech acts can also be ironical. Subsequently, Amante (1981) suggests that ironic speech acts are not performative; they are necessarily indirect and insincere, and the insincerity is intentionally expressed (Haverkate, 1990). The insincerity itself is when the speaker violates one felicity condition, usually the sincerity condition (Glucksberg, 1995). While the previous theories root in the traditional account of irony, Sperber and Wilson (1981), the founders of Relevance Theory, were the first who presented the mention (echoic mention) theory, noting that irony is an echoic mention. It is also said that the speaker who uses irony has a rejecting or disapproving attitude towards the echoed utterance. The revised mention theory called 'echoic reminder theory' is later proposed by Kreuz and Glucksberg (1989), claiming that ironical utterance hints at the previous event, including expectations and implicit norms.

The recent theory of verbal irony, the asif-theory, is proposed by Garmendia (2007), who claims that irony is when the speaker makes an utterance. The hearer realizes that the speaker overtly shows that the locutionary content of her utterance does not match with the referential content of her motivating belief, from which the speaker intends to communicate the ironic content. Garmendia (2007) also states that the characteristics of irony are always critical and are usually humorous. Although contradiction and echo are not always necessary in irony, she adds that they become a pathway for the hearer to understand the content the speaker intends to communicate.

There are various types of irony, and each type may function differently. Gibbs (2000) proposes five types of irony:

3. Jocular: used when the speaker humorously teases one another.
4. Sarcasm: a language to convey the more negative intent.
5. Rhetorical question: used when the speaker asks a question that implies a humorous or critical assertion.
6. Hyperbole: a language to express non-literal meaning by exaggerating the reality of the situation.
7. Understatement: used when the speaker speaks ironically by stating far less than the actual case.

Gibbs (2000) states that all five types of irony were judged as humorous, with jocular utterances as the most humorous. The association between irony and humor has been mentioned many times by scholars. It is explained that humor appears as a discourse goal of irony (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993) and becomes the social function of irony (Dews et al., 1995). There are many examples of irony that are considered humorous, as well as cases of humor that are not ironical and cases of irony that are not humorous (Attardo, 2010).

There is an abundance of terminology of humor, such as humor, laughter, the comic, the ludicrous, the funny, joke, and wit, and there is no terminology consensus amongst the researchers since the words often substitute each other (Raskin, 1985). However, the term humor is often used in academic studies to define similar phenomena (Attardo, 2002). The phenomena of humor and irony that are interconnected are explained by Attardo (2010), who argues that a clash between register in text and register associated with the subject matter creates opposition that is important in humor production. Dews et al. (1995) suggest that humor derives from the surprise in irony. Humor occurs because of the disparity between what is said and what is meant. Garmendia (2007) also states that humor arises when the hearer resolves the incongruity in irony and becomes the product of irony.

Television series provides many stories from a various genre that people around the world can enjoy. Sitcom, a television series and a comedy genre, is used in this study because it has interesting, comic, and relatable characters. It also provides an abundance of data, humorous utterances that contain irony.

## METHODS

The data of this study were collected from the sitcom *The Office (US)* Season 2, which consists of 22 episodes, available on the online streaming platform Amazon Prime. Since the series is streamed on Amazon Prime, the researcher purchased a monthly subscription in order to watch the series. In obtaining the data, the researcher first watched the videos and observed the utterances which contained verbal irony. Whenever the characters made ironical utterances, the researcher paused the video and wrote down the transcription of the utterances or the dialogues with the aid of the English subtitle, followed by writing down the context. Subsequently, ironical utterances which were considered humorous were marked. Since there is no canned laughter to indicate the funny utterances, the researcher in this study determines the humorous utterances as she perceives them. Each episode was watched and observed repeatedly to avoid any errors.

Utterances or dialogues collected were then listed chronologically based on the episodes and were written with a coding system together with the time stamp and the context. After the data had been coded, they were classified using the theory of ironical communication pathway proposed by Garmendia (2007) and were classified into their categories based on Gibbs' (2000) taxonomy. The ironical utterances that were considered funny were analyzed by applying Garmendia's (2007) theory.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In *The Office (US)* Season 2, all five types of verbal irony were found with a different frequency of occurrences. The irony was found in almost all episodes, excluding episodes 7 and 18, which have no ironical utterances identified. The result revealed 97

occurrences of verbal irony, in which 35 occurrences were classified as sarcasm, 24 occurrences as jocularity, 18 occurrences as a rhetorical question, 16 occurrences as hyperbole, and four occurrences as understatement.

Table 1. Frequency of forms of verbal irony in *The Office (US)* Season 2

No.	Types of Verbal Irony	Token	%
1.	Jocularity	24	25
2.	Sarcasm	35	36
3.	Rhetorical question	18	19
4.	Hyperbole	16	16
5.	Understatement	4	4
<b>Total</b>		<b>97</b>	<b>100</b>

Among the occurrences of verbal irony found in the sitcom, sarcasm was used the most often, with a percentage of 36% of the occurrences. 25% were occurrences of jocularity, 19% were the rhetorical question, 16% were hyperbole, and 4% were an understatement. Besides being the most used type, sarcasm appeared in 15 episodes out of 22 episodes and became the type with the most frequent occurrences within the episodes of season 2.

The five types of verbal irony, jocularity, sarcasm, rhetorical question, hyperbole, and understatement found in *The Office (US)* Season 2 are discussed below.

### Jocularity

Jocularity is used for teasing, joking, or making fun of others. In the sitcom, most of the jocularity was uttered by Jim Halpert together with Pam Beesly. Jim is a great salesman, a mild-mannered man, and an easy-going coworker whom everyone grew fond of easily. He and Pam share the same jokes, and they enjoy teasing their office fellow, Dwight Schrute. Jim has a sense of humor that, unfortunately, was not understood by others. An example of jocularity is found in the following dialogue.

(1) Episode 20 (00:00:00,967 → 00:00:15,514)

**Context:** Dwight voluntarily conducted an interview investigating the employees after finding half a joint of drug in the parking lot. Strikingly, he wore the uniform of a sheriff's deputy and acted exaggeratedly

*like a detective. It triggered Jim, with whom his relationship was already tense, to tease him.*

Dwight: Kevin Malone, you're next. Spit that out.  
Spit... okay, come on. Let's go.

Jim: **You look cute today, Dwight.**

Dwight: **Thanks, girl.**

Jim and Dwight have a tense relationship as office colleagues. Pulling pranks on his fellow salesman is a regular habit for Jim as a form of revenge for the adverse criticism he often receives from Dwight. In investigating his colleagues, related to the findings of a drug in the parking lot, Dwight puts on a sheriff's deputy uniform, which makes him look very conspicuous. Jim, who sees Dwight dressed in the uniform, then ridicules him in a jocular way by complimenting that Dwight "looks cute today." However, Dwight, who wanted to look gallant in the uniform, does not see it as a compliment. Being conscious that he is being ridiculed, Dwight replies to the compliment with an insincere "thank you" and addresses Jim with "girl" to make it overt. Both Jim and Dwight use jocularity to tease each other. Jim intends to point out that Dwight is overdoing it, and Dwight's reply does not comply with the sincerity condition of thanking. The lack of commitment to the contents of their utterances that do not match their actual beliefs of deriding each other creates a discrepancy in which humor is produced.

### Sarcasm

Sarcasm is used to communicate the speaker's negative intent. Garmendia (2007) describes sarcasm as aggressive irony in which the intention is clear and is always hurtful. The occurrences of sarcasm in this sitcom are intended to express hostility towards the victim. The following is an example of sarcasm:

(2) Episode 8 (00:04:14,153 → 00:04:46,051)

**Context:** Dunder Mifflin's employees had a performance review. It was known that Dwight and Jim were rivals, and they antagonized each other. Dwight often criticized Jim's work performances and stated that he was the worst person to share a desk with.

Dwight: Oh, hey. Listen, Jim. Here's a little tip for your performance review.

Jim: Okay.

Dwight: Tell Michael that we should be stocking more of the double tabbed manilla file folders.

Jim: We don't have double tabbed manilla files folders.

Dwight: Oh yes we do.

Jim: No, we don't.

Dwight: Yeah, it's a new product. So you should just suggest that to him, and then he'll be sure to give you a raise.

Jim: Well, I'm not asking for a raise. **I'm gonna actually be asking for a pay decrease.**

Dwight: Uh, that is so stupid. What if he gives it to you?

Jim: I win. Ugh.

The dialogue is between Jim and Dwight, who are in the same division. Dwight feels confident about the result of his performance review since he always does a good job and is always good at managing his time. Because of his good work performance, he gives Jim a tip on getting a raise. Jim feels irritated and intends to mock Dwight by jokingly saying that he is going to “ask for a pay decrease” instead. After realizing that Jim is actually making fun of him, Dwight asks him what if it becomes a reality. Unpredictably, Jim answers, “I win,” to emphasize his annoyance. Based on the context provided, it can be assured that Jim is not going to ask for a pay decrease because it is a ridiculous and uncommon thing to do in a performance review. His real intention is to reject Dwight's tip and express his annoyance and disapproval over Dwight's unrequested tip by saying the contrary. It can be seen that there is a disparity between Jim's utterance and intention. The disparity evokes laughter. Furthermore, humor is also derived from the unexpected intention of asking for a pay decrease, creating a surprise for the audience, and eliciting laughter.

### Rhetorical Question

A rhetorical question is used when a speaker asks a question that does not require an answer. It can be used to imply humorous or critical assertions. The

following dialogue is an example of the use of a rhetorical question.

(3) Episode 12 (00:03:49,830 → 00:04:02,774)

**Context:** Michael burned his foot on his Foreman Grill in the morning and wrapped it up in bubble wrap. He behaved annoyingly. When he arrived at the office, he announced that he had just had a terrible injury while, in fact, he only got a little burn. Jim saw his bubble-wrapped foot and started playing with the bubble wrap.

Michael: (To Jim) Please stop popping my cast. Thank you.

Jim: **So where are you shipping your foot?**

Michael: Ha ha ha. So where are you shipping...

Dwight: Your foot.

In the example, Michael acts exaggeratedly as he always does. He has a minor burn on his foot, but he acts annoyingly, just as though it is a severe burn. He acts in an aggravating manner by using crutches, which he does not need, and wrapping his foot in bubble wrap. Jim, who sees how annoying Michael is, cannot help himself teasing him, especially when he notices the bubble-wrapped foot. It is reflected in Jim's utterance, “Where are you shipping your foot?” The question posed does not require a reply because Jim is just ridiculing Michael's bubble-wrapped foot. The way the foot is wrapped makes it look like a package that is ready to be shipped. Michael's weird attitude and the discrepancy between Jim literally asking the question and his intention to ridicule evokes laughter. Michael, who realizes that Jim is making fun of his foot, does not make a reply but instead responds with fake laughter, “Ha ha ha” and repeats Jim's rhetorical question.

### Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a figurative language to express non-literal meaning by exaggerating or minimizing the reality of the situation. The use of hyperbole can be observed in the following example:

(4) Episode 21 (00:02:17,037 → 00:02:27,913)

**Context:** Oscar was complaining to Toby about Angela's poster, which portrayed two babies dressed

*up as adults. It was very disconcerting for him, so he insisted that it should be taken down.*

Oscar: It's like child abuse! **I say if Jesus saw that, he'd freak out! He'd freak out, Toby, I mean, on so many levels.** And I'm supposed to work there! I'm supposed...

Angela has a poster portraying two babies dressed in adult costumes that she got from the secret Santa game at the Christmas party. She likes the poster and displays it on her desk, while her desk mate, Oscar, feels perplexed because he thinks that it is creepy and offensive. He then vents his rage on Toby, the HR representative, saying that "If Jesus saw that, he'd freak out!". It is perspicuous that Oscar intends to convey how disgusting the poster is, using hyperbole stating that even Jesus would freak out if he saw it. By repeating "He'd freak out..." Oscar wants to emphasize the repulsiveness of the poster. In the dialogue, Oscar uses hyperbole to express his strong feelings against the poster. The use of the hyperbole of "even Jesus would freak out" results in incongruity that provokes laughter.

### Understatement

Understatement is a language that is used to ironically state less than the actual case is. The following dialogue shows how understatement is used to arouse humor.

(5) Episode 21 (00:10:07,774 → 00:10:27,425)

**Context:** *As an HR representative, Toby frequently received complaint letters, which were letters the employees wrote to make complaints about other employees. Toby would make a recap of the letters and send them to headquarters. On one occasion, Michael took a complaint letter forcefully from Toby and openly read them in front of the employees, thinking by doing that, he could solve the problems.*

Michael: Here is a Kelly complaint. "Ryan never returns my calls." Ah. Join the club.

Ryan: My voice mail's real spotty... sometimes.

Kelly: I didn't file a complaint. I was just talking.

Toby: To your HR representative.

Kelly: To my friend, I thought. I want that withdrawn.

Toby: Fine, I'll take your name off. **So no one will know.**

Everyone in Dunder Muffin Scranton is allowed to write a complaint letter about other employees and send it to Toby. The letters are kept safely in Toby's desk until Michael one day takes them forcefully and reads them out loud to everyone. Kelly, who wrote one of the letters, claims that she was only grumbling back then and wants the letter to be withdrawn. Toby agrees and says, "*So no one will know*" that understates the actual fact that everyone has just listened to her complaint, making it no longer a secret. The contradiction between what Toby says and what actually happens creates a discrepancy leading to the creation of humor.

The result of this study reveals that sarcasm becomes the most used type, which is contradictory to the previous research conducted by Whalen, J. M, et al. (2013) that shows hyperbole as the most used type. The researcher assumes that the contradictory results of the two studies derive from different data sources. The previous study used blog posts in written texts that encourage the writers to create certain forms of expression since blogs that are asynchronous and asymmetrical are used to deliver personal expressions. On the other hand, this study uses the utterances that contain verbal irony in a sitcom. The characters in the sitcom have diverse behaviors and characteristics that make the working days become very dynamic. There are also competitions and disputes which occasionally end up creating conflicts that develop tensions. Some workers also like to tease each other in a jocular way by using verbal irony that allows them to create funny remarks that enable them to lighten the atmosphere at work. In expressing their negative feelings, the characters must not show direct aggressive manner because the office is where the employees must act professionally. The characters use verbal irony instead to bring humor to the situation and to soften verbal acts.

### CONCLUSION

The result of this study reveals that all five types of verbal irony were found in 22 episodes of *The Office (US)* Season 2, with sarcasm identified as the most

frequently used type. The use of sarcasm, as well as the other types of verbal irony, enables the characters to carry out a communicative strategy that is able to express criticism without being blatant. Besides denoting criticism, the use of verbal irony also allows the characters to produce humor. All five forms of verbal irony found in the sitcom are considered humorous, although the humor is gradual depending on the speaker's level of criticism. Sarcasm as a verbal irony with strong criticism would likely be less humorous than jocularly that is used to tease and make fun of others without purposely causing harm. Based on the analysis, the humor element that is aroused from verbal irony derives from the incongruity between what is said and what is actually meant, from which it can be concluded that verbal irony is related to humor.

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