Flouting the maxims in comedy

An analysis of flouting in the comedy series Community

Brott mot maximer i komedi

En analys av brott mot konversationsmaximer i komediserien Community

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Abstract

This paper explores how flouting of the Gricean maxims is used to create comedy in the television series Community. The aim of the paper is to find out what maxims are flouted the most to create comedy and what maxims the different characters flout in order to create comedy. The paper examines the use of flouts in different situations and explores in what situations the different characters flout the maxims for comedy. The paper is based on transcription of eight episodes of the series. The results show that the maxim of quantity was flouted most often, and some characters used more flouts than others. These results suggest that the use of flouts has to do with their different personalities, which is why some characters did not use as many flouts in order to create comedy, since it would not be in line with their personality.

Keywords: conversational maxims, comedy, flouting of maxims, implicature, H.P Grice

Sammanfattning

Detta arbete undersöker hur brott mot de Griceiska maximerna används för att skapa komedi i tv-serien Community. Syftet med arbetet är att undersöka vilka maximer som oftast bröts för att skapa komedi och vilka maximer som bröts av de olika karaktärerna för att skapa komik. Arbetet använder transkiberade exempel från serien för att illustrera hur vissa karaktärer i serien använder sig av brott av maximer för att skapa komedi. Arbetet undersöker även i vilka situationer som karaktärerna använder sig av brott mot maximerna för att skapa komedi. Slutsatsen av studien tyder på att den maxim som bröts mest var kvantitetsmaximen och att vissa karaktärer bröt mot maximerna mer än andra. Resultatet indikerar att det beror på karaktärernas personligheter om de använder sig mer av brott mot maximer än andra. Resultatet visar även att vissa karaktärer använde sig mindre av brott av maximer på grund av att det moststred deras personlighet.

Nyckelord: konversationsmaxim, komedi, brott mot maxim, implicature, H.P Grice
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1. Introduction and aims

Spoken language is one of the most basic ways of human communication. We speak with each other in order to convey information about various things and to cooperate. In different cultures there are rules and norms that make people understand each other, and these rules apply not only to the way language is used; there are also rules and norms that regulate how conversation should be conducted. One set of rules for what constitutes a successful conversation among interlocutors is referred to as conversational maxims. These maxims were introduced by the philosopher of language Paul H. Grice (Maienborn 2011:18). These maxims are rules which are normally followed in a conversation in order for people to understand each other on a direct and basic level. However, maxims can be violated, which means that they are not adhered to. A violation of the maxims happens for instance when someone is liable to mislead someone, as in Paltridge’s example when a mother tells her children “Mummy's gone on a little holiday because she needs a rest” (Paltridge 2006:65). What she is really saying is that she is going away to consider whether or not she is going to divorce their father. In the example, the mother is deliberately misleading her children by lying, which violates the maxim of quality. Maxims can also be flouted. The difference between when a maxim is violated and when it is flouted is that when someone is flouting a maxim, they are not deliberately trying to deceive or mislead their interlocutors, but they are deliberately not observing the maxims, in order for the interlocutors to understand another set of meaning (Paltridge 2006:65). The flouting of a maxim can also be used for comic effect. In the following example, where a flouting of the maxims is used to create comedy, a husband complains about his wife’s constant nagging and the wife replies to his comment.

(1) Husband: Your nagging goes right in one ear and out the other.
Wife: That’s because there is nothing between to stop it. (Kotthoff 2006:274)

In example (1) the addressee utters *That’s because there is nothing between to stop it* to respond to her husband’s comment. Here she is not deliberately trying to deceive her husband; what she is implying is that her husband has no brain. This actually means that the husband does not listen to his wife's constant nagging and therefore she says something that is obviously not true in order for him to look for another set of meanings. Flouting for comic effect is the focus of this paper. The aim of the paper is to identify instances of floutings of the four conversational maxims and see how they are used for comic effect in eight episodes of the comedy series *Community*. This will be done by means of the following research questions:
1. How often are the conversational maxims flouted to create comic effect in the comedy series *Community*?

2. What conversational maxims do the main characters in the series flout, and how often?

3. What are the functions of these flouts?

In comedy series the dialogue between characters is constructed and is not authentic use of language. On the other hand, the scriptwriters do construct spoken interactions in a way that conversations might occur in real life, which the audience of the series understands.

### 2. Background

In this section there will be a general presentation of pragmatics in section 2.1. Another important aspect of the study is implicature which will be presented in section 2.2. Grice’s co-operative principle and the four conversational maxims will be presented in sections 2.3—2.4. Relevance theory and neo-Gricean theory will be presented in section 2.5. A previous study of where the use of flouting has been studied during dinner conversations will be presented in section 2.6.

### 2.1 Pragmatics

What pragmatics is about can summed up in two phrases: *meaning in use* and *meaning in context*. There are two different scholarly camps that divide up the field of pragmatics depending on whether the focus is on speaker meaning or utterance interpretation (Thomas 1995:1). The term speaker meaning is often used by scholars who study social factors in the field, i.e. the focus is on the producers of the utterances and the different levels of meaning in their utterances. The second term, utterance interpretation, is often used among scholars who study the cognitive processes by which the receivers of the utterances interpret the meaning of the utterances (Thomas 1995:2).

There are three different levels of meaning within the field of pragmatics. The first level of meaning is called abstract meaning. Abstract meaning deals with the interpretation of words, phrases and sentences, to see what they could mean. The aim is to see what different meanings can lie within one word, one phrase or one sentence (Thomas 1995:2-3). The second level of meaning is called utterance meaning. Utterance meaning looks at what
is intended by the person who is making an utterance, due to the context in which the sentence is said. Cruse (2000:26) gives an example of utterance meaning (2):

(2) A: Am I in time for supper?  
    B: I've cleared the table.

In this example the speaker is implying more than what is said, due to the context, i.e., the sentence *I've cleared the table* actually means that A is too late for supper. This is what *utterance meaning* is, the understanding of an utterance due to its context (Cruse 2000:27).

The third and final level of meaning is called *force*. Force is the communicative intention of a speaker, i.e., what the speaker intends to say. An example of force can be illustrated with the utterance “Is that your car?” (Thomas 1995:18), where the interlocutor understands the utterance meaning of the sentence, i.e. that the car belongs to the person being asked. However, the fact that the interlocutor understands the utterance meaning does not mean he understands the *force* behind the utterance. With that utterance the speaker could mean several things, such as asking for a lift, asking the interlocutor to move the car if he is blocking the driveway, or he could be expressing admiration of the car’s appearance. These are examples of what the speaker could be intending with the same utterance (Thomas 1995:18) and that is *force*.

### 2.2 Implicature

*Implicature* is a term which is used to describe something that is conveyed beyond the semantic meaning of the words in a conversation, something that adds an extra level of meaning. Implicatures can be divided into two kinds, *conventional implicatures* and *conversational implicatures*. Conventional implicatures are words that can carry an implicature within a sentence. Four words that function as implicatures on the sentence level are *but, even, therefore* and *yet* (Thomas 1995:57). Thomas (1995:57) explains that in the utterance “she was cursed with a stammer, unmarried but far from stupid” *but* has the function to convey the opposite of the expectations, which is to say that unmarried people are usually stupid. A *conversational implicature*, on the other hand, is when an utterance in a conversation has more meaning than the words uttered. Thomas (1995:58) provides the example of an ambulance man who has someone vomit in his lap and utters “Great, that's really great! That's made my Christmas”. Here something other than the words uttered is being implied; there is an additional set of meaning, and the man is actually expressing that he does not enjoy getting vomit all over his lap.
2.3 The cooperative principle

The term the co-operative principle was coined by H.P Grice, who was a philosopher of language at Oxford University. In his works in the 1940’s and 1950’s he suggested that in conversation, interlocutors unconsciously adhere to four conversational maxims, which are subsumed under the co-operative principle (Thomas 1995:56). Grice described the cooperative principle in these words:

Make your 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. (cited in Thomas 1995:61- 62)

What the cooperative principle says is that people who are involved in a conversation are working on the assumption that certain rules control their operation, i.e., a set of culturally bound rules that vary in different cultures but are followed by all the participants of a conversation in order for a conversation to be successful. The main underlying assumption of the cooperative principle is that people cooperate when they are conversing (Thomas 1995:62).

2.4 The four conversational maxims

The co-operative principle includes four conversational maxims, as suggested by Grice. The first maxim is the Maxim of Quantity, which says “Make your contribution as informative as is required” (Thomas 1995:63) and “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required” (Thomas 1995:63). The second maxim is the Maxim of Quality, which states that the person making an utterance should not say something that they do not believe to be true or for which they lack adequate evidence. The third maxim is the Maxim of Relation, which states that the utterance should be relevant. The fourth maxim, finally, is the Maxim of Manner, which states that the utterance should be “brief, be orderly, avoid ambiguity and avoid obscurity of expression” (Thomas 1995:63). If all of the maxims are being observed, there will be no additional set of meaning added to the conversation (Thomas 1995:64).

2.4.1 Non-observance of the maxims

The non-observance of the maxims is of interest while studying meaning that is not conveyed on a direct level. According to Grice, there are five ways of failing to observe the maxims (Thomas 1995:64). The first one is flouting a maxim, where a participant in a conversation
chooses to ignore one or more of the maxims by using a conversational implicature. Ignoring maxims by using conversational implicatures means that the participant adds meaning to the literal meaning of the utterance. The conversational implicature that is added when flouting is not intended to deceive the recipient of the conversation, but the purpose is to make the recipient look for other meaning (Thomas 1995:65). Flouting a maxim also signals to the hearer that the speaker is not following the co-operative principle (Cruse 2000:360). The example of a conversational implicature, cited in 2.2, demonstrates how a flouting of the maxims works. Here the ambulance man is deliberately saying something that is not true, which flouts the maxim of quality and tells the interlocutor to look for another set of meaning (Thomas 1995:58). There can be some difficulty understanding flouts since the process itself does not intend to give a justification or an explanation for the flouting (Cruse 2000:360).

The second type of non-observance is violating a maxim. Violating a maxim is when someone in a conversation fails to observe one or more maxims with the intention to deceive the recipient, often using an implicature with the intention to mislead. An example of how a maxim can be violated is shown in the following example. When an athlete from a sports team gets pulled out of a race, the press officer tells the audience about the athlete's absence: “She has a family bereavement; her grandmother has died” (Thomas 1995:73). The violating of the maxim of quality happens in this case, since the press officer is deliberately lying about the athlete's absence. The truth is that she is actually not attending due to having had positive results on a drug test. Since the information is untrue and misleading, the person is violating the maxim of quality (Thomas 1995:73-74).

The third type of non-observance of a maxim is infringement. A participant who is infringing a maxim in a conversation has no intention to use an implicature, nor does he have the intention to deceive the recipient of the conversation. Instead, infringement occurs when someone is learning a language. The speaker may be a child or an adult learner. An example of the infringement of a maxim can be seen in example (3), where an English native speaking carpenter talks to a non-native speaker of English, asking what type of wood he wants for his shelves (3):

(3) Carpenter: I'm not sure what kind of wood you would want to use for the shelves.
    K: Yes, we want to have wood shelves. (Rost 2013:44)

In this case the person is not in any way trying to create an implicature or trying to mislead the other person, but K is simply not understanding what the carpenter said.
The fourth type of non-observance of a maxim is *opting out* of a maxim. Opting out of a maxim occurs when someone is indicating that they are unwilling to cooperate in the way a maxim operates. The opting out of a maxim often occurs when someone wants to withhold the truth for reasons that are ethical or private. In this case the non-observance is not designed to create a false implicature or to appear uncooperative. An example of opting out of a maxim can be seen in example (4), from a conversation when a person calls in to a radio show hosted by Nick Ross:

(4) Caller: … um I lived in uh a country where people sometimes need to flee that country.
    Ross: Uh, where was that?
    Caller: It’s a country in Asia and I don’t want to say any more. (Thomas 1995:75)

In this case the person is not trying to be uncooperative, but is withholding information so that he or others will not get hurt. This is different from a flouting of the maxims since the person is signaling that she does not want to be cooperative. A flouting of the maxims is to deliberately fail to observe a maxim in order to create an implicature.

The fifth and last type of non-observance of a maxim is *suspending* a maxim, which happens when participants in a conversation are not expecting the maxims to be fully fulfilled, since the participants are withholding information that is to them culturally necessary. This would not be seen as uncooperative by other members of that community. Suspending a maxim does not generate an implicature to the members of the community in which this occurs (Thomas 1995:76). An example of the suspending of a maxim can be seen in (5). In this example, the speaker is the daughter of a murdered man and she is talking to an officer of the Navajo Tribal police:

(5) ‘Last time you were with that FBI man – asking about the one who got killed,’ she said, respecting the Navajo taboo of not speaking name of the dead. ‘You found out who killed that man?’ (Thomas 1995:76)

In this case the woman is not observing the maxim of quantity, since she is speaking in vague words about the man who got killed, despite the fact that she knows him very well. This would create an implicature telling the interlocutor that she does not know the man who got killed, but since they follow the same traditions, which in this case means not speaking the names of the dead, the people involved are aware that the maxim is being suspended, and therefore no implicature is created (Thomas 1995:77).

The focus of the paper will be on flouts of the maxims, since flouting is one way a non-
observance of the maxims which can create comic effect, along with infringement of the maxims. But flouting is the only non-observance that requires the person who speaks to make a deliberate choice not to adhere to the maxims, unlike infringement, where the comic effect is due to the speaker’s lack of proficiency in the language.

2.4.2 Flouts that exploit the maxim of quality

The maxim of quality is flouted when a speaker deliberately says something that is untrue or for which the speaker has inadequate evidence. An implicature is generated when the speaker deliberately says something that is false. The speaker is not trying to deceive the recipient in any way, which leads the listener to look for another set of meanings of the utterance (Thomas 1995:67). An example of this from Thomas (1995:68) is a conversation held on a train ride, where a person who just wants to read a book is being disturbed by a talkative stranger (Thomas 1995:68):

(6)  A: What do you do?
    B: I’m a teacher.
    A: Where do you teach?
    B: Outer Mongolia
    A: Sorry I asked!

In this case, the response from speaker B was a deliberate non-observance of the maxim of quality when she said *Outer Mongolia*, where an implicature was generated, which told the other person to look for an additional meaning. The non-observance of the maxim in this case was not meant to deceive; since the other person understood the answer to be deliberately untrue, this made the person look for another set of meanings, i.e. the answer *Outer Mongolia* created an implicature, which told the other person that she wanted to be left alone (Thomas 1995:68-69). Another case where the maxim of quality is being flouted can be seen in Cruse's example, “I married a rat” (2000:360). In this case the hearer of the sentence has to look for another meaning since a person obviously did not marry a small animal, but rather married someone with similar traits as those which are ascribed to a rat. The implicature in this case is a metaphor for how the person sees his partner in marriage (Cruse 2000:360).
2.4.3 Flouts that exploit the maxim of quantity

The maxim of quantity is flouted when a speaker deliberately gives more or less information than is needed within a conversation. An example of a flouting of the maxim of quantity can be seen in example (7):

(7) A: How are we getting there?
    B: Well *we're* getting there in Dave's car. (Thomas 1995:68)

In this case B stresses *we* in a way that signals to A that she is not included, which through its implicature tells A that B's friend Dave has a ride arranged for them, and that A is not going to travel with them to designated destination (Thomas 1995:68). The information given in example (7) is not enough for the interlocutor to understand at a direct level.

2.4.4 Flouts that exploit the maxim of relation

The maxim of relation is flouted when a speaker is giving a response or making an observation that is deliberately not relevant to the topic that is being discussed. An example of flouting the maxim of relation is when the hearer changes the subject or fails to keep to the topic (Thomas 1995:70). An example of this can be seen in example (8):

(8) We were discussing the ordination of women. The bishop asked what I thought. Should women take the services? So long as it doesn't have to be me, I wanted to say, they can be taken by a trained gorilla. 'Oh yes,' Geoffrey chips in, 'Susan's all in favour. She's keener than I am, aren't you, darling?' *More sprouts anybody?* I said. (Thomas 1995:70)

In this case the utterance that flouts the maxim of relation is *More sprouts anybody*. By mentioning something irrelevant to the topic, the speaker indicates that she does not want to take part in the topic which the conversation is about. This is a deliberate non-observance of the maxim, since she has taken part in the conversation (Thomas 1995:70).

Another case of where the maxim of relation is flouted can be seen in example (9):

(9) Army Officer: Name?
    Neddy Seagoon: Neddy Seagoon
    Army Officer: Rank?
    Neddy Seagoon: Private
    Army Officer: Sex?
    Neddy Seagoon: Yes, please (Flowerdew 2012:98)

In this case the response to the utterance *Sex?* creates an implicature, were Seagoon deliberately misunderstands the question and thinks of sexual relations rather than gender.
In this case flouting of the maxim of relation is used to create comic effect, which is something that comedians or comedies make use. A prerequisite for the comic effect in (9) is the ambiguity of the word sex.

2.4.5 Flouts that exploit the maxim of manner

The maxim of manner is flouted when a speaker deliberately fails to observe the maxim by not being brief, using obscure language, not being orderly or using ambiguity. This creates an implicature which makes the participants look for an additional set of meanings (Thomas 1995:71). An example that flouts the maxim of manner is (10):

(10) Interviewer: Did the United States Government play any part in the Duvaliers’ departure? Did they, for example, actively encourage him to leave?
    Official: I would not try to steer you away from that conclusion. (Thomas 1995:71)

In this conversation the person who is answering the interviewer's questions is not being deliberately unhelpful since the person could have refrained from responding or said 'No comment'. The implicature in this case tells the interviewer that the official does not want to admit to their involvement directly, but does so indirectly by not being direct with the answer (Thomas 1995:71).

Another example that flouts the maxim of manner is when a speaker is intentionally ambiguous. Flowerdew (2013:99) provides the example “Go to work on an egg” which means either that ‘an egg should be eaten before work’ or that the hearer ‘should start eating an egg’. This works since it is possible in both the metaphorical and in the literal sense of the sentence (Flowerdew 2013:99).

2.5 Relevance theory and neo-Gricean theory

Relevance theory began as a critique aimed at Grice's approach to the use of the maxims that govern human communication. The main critique is that the different maxims are not equally important. According to relevance theory, all maxims can be subsumed under the maxim of relation. Adherents of relevance theory argue that the only message that is needed in a conversation is that the information is relevant enough for the recipient to understand, which makes the other maxims redundant (Cruse 2000:368). The principle of relevance, which is the relevance theory equivalent of the Gricean co-operative principle (Cruse 2000:369), is explained by Cruse (2000:369) in this way: “Every bona fide linguistic communication automatically carries with it, by the mere fact of its being executed, the utterer's belief in its
optimal relevance.” What this means is that the speaker who is conveying information is of the belief that the utterance holds enough relevance for the receiver to understand the information that is being conveyed (Cruse 2000:369).

In addition to relevance theory, there is another critique aimed at the Gricean maxims. The other critique is called neo-Gricean theory, which states that there is a set of two principles that are needed for speech to be as communicative as possible and will not lead to other meanings than what is said at a speaker level. These two principles are first the Q-principle, where Q stands for quantity and states “say as much as we can” (Mey 2001:84). The second is the R-principle where R stands for relevance, and states “say no more than we must” (Mey 2001:84).

These two theories consider the maxims of quantity and relation to be the most important, and they exclude the maxims of quality and manner. However, in the present study, Grice’s original theory will be used, which means all four maxims will be used in the analysis of the material.

2.6 Previous research

A study by Brumark (2006), based on authentic interaction, focused on how family members are not observing the Gricean maxims, which in this case includes both violating and flouting the maxims. The aim of the study was also to research the pre-conditions of speech acts and the different reasons why the family members were using indirectness in their interaction with each other, mainly between parent and child, parent and parent, child and child. Brumark (2006:1207-1209) studied the flouting and violating of the maxims during dinner conversations. What the researcher found was that when parents were addressing their spouses, the men were never the addressees of flouts. According to the study children were the main addresses of flouts in the families, where the parents used flouts in order to comment on utterances made by their children (Brumark 2006:1235). An example of how a non-observance of the maxims was used to regulate children’s behavior, in this example by using sarcasm, is shown in (11):

Father:         gör en insamling nu å  så gör du ett sista dödsryck va?  
[put in a real effort now and make your life’s final attempt (to eat up)]  
potatis å/ borde vara rätt laddning för dej  
[potatoes should be what you need to charge (your batteries)]  
(Brumark 2006:1217)
In example (11), Brumark shows how the father is being sarcastic in order to regulate the child’s behavior by flouting the maxim of quality. The flouting of the maxim of quality is done here by the father’s utterance *make your life’s final attempt (to eat)* where he is deliberately saying something that is not true, which creates an implicature telling the child that he needs to eat up his food. Brumark gives a definition of what constitutes sarcasm and irony. Irony in Brumark’s case is defined as “saying one thing and meaning something else” (2006:1216). Brumark defines sarcasm as “a ruder and more hostile kind of irony” (2006:1217). Sarcastic flouts of the maxims were mostly used by the fathers of the families, where the majority of the flouts were used to help regulate the behavior of their children. However, sarcastic comments made by the fathers had little effect on the children, since they were more open to resist their father’s requests when they were addressed with sarcastic flouts. The children in the families also used flouts for irony and in jokes. The children were mostly using flouts when addressing their parents and siblings, and the reason for children to flout the maxims in order to create irony and jokes were mainly to be social (Brumark 2006:1235-1237).

What is useful with this study is that there is a gender and age difference between the people in the study. This is also the case in the comedy series *Community*, where the main characters of the show are males and females representing different age groups.

### 3. Methods

The aim of the study is to see what maxims are being flouted for comic effect and also in what situations these flouts occur. The reason for searching for flouts is that certain comic utterances use flouts of the maxims to create comedy, i.e. to imply something that is not said in the conversations. To test my thesis I have chosen to study segments of dialogue in the American comedy series *Community*.

#### 3.1 Material

The material that I have chosen to do my research on is the comedy series *Community*. This series was chosen since I had noticed many instances in which flouting of the maxims occurs to create comedy. Each episode of the series is about 20 minutes long, and altogether eight episodes are used in the study. As each episode is 20 minutes, the total length of the eight episodes is 2 hours and 40 minutes.

A case of when a flouting of a maxim is used to create comedy can be seen in example (12):
The school is being decorated with German themed decorations due to Oktoberfest celebrations. The study group is in the cafeteria when the dean of the school is informing them about a break-dance competition and what the main prize of that competition is.

Dean: The winner gets to annex Poland. Kidding, the winner gets an iTunes gift card.

In this case the Dean is flouting the maxim of quality. The flouting of the maxim of quality happens when the Dean says the prize is to annex Poland which is not true, but he does not say that to deceive the hearers. This creates an implicature where the German setting of the celebration plays a major part, which tells interlocutors that since the competition is due to a German celebration, the prize is also linked with Germany, i.e. Nazi Germany occupied Poland during World War II.

### 3.1.1 Characters

In the comedy series *Community*, the main characters of the series are all attending a community college, and they are all part of the same study group. The series has seven main characters, whom I will describe below.¹

The first main character is Jeffrey Winger. Winger is a former lawyer who had cheated on his bar exam and holds a fake bachelor's degree. One day he got caught and lost his job which forced him to enroll in college in order for him to be able to work as a lawyer in the future. Jeffrey is often cynical and sees himself as the leader of the study group. Jeffrey is in his late thirties.

The second character is Britta Perry. Britta is a former social activist who wants to become a psychologist. Her social activism is reflected in her character, since she is often anti-establishment in her utterances. Britta is in her late twenties.

The third character is Abed Nadir. Abed is a young man with Asperger's Syndrome who has a keen interest in film series and movies. Since Abed has Asperger's Syndrome, he sometimes has a hard time understanding the social context. To help him cope with this, Abed has studied social situations in films and series, to a point where he can relate any situation to a movie or a TV series. Abed is in his early twenties.

The fourth character is Troy Barnes. Troy is a former football player and is best friends with Abed. Troy makes stupid and naïve utterances due to his shielded upbringing. Troy is in his early twenties.

¹ The description of the characters is from my own observations when I watched the series.
The fifth character is Annie Edison. Annie is a former drug addict and a very devoted student who has high expectations of her study results. Annie is often the voice of reason in the series, and thinks that most things should be done ethically. Annie is in her early twenties.

The sixth character is Pierce Hawthorne. Pierce is a retiree who wants something to do to pass time. Pierce is for the most part narrow-minded and racist, even though he does not realize it himself. Pierce is often kicked out of the study group due to various comments and actions that are inappropriate. Pierce is in his sixties.

The seventh and final character is Shirley Bennett. Shirley is a divorcée who wants to start her own baking business. Shirley is also a very religious person, which is reflected in her personality and actions. Shirley is in her late thirties.

3.2 Identification of flouts

The main aim of the study is, as stated above, how flouting the maxims of conversation is used for comic effect. Here I will describe how I identified instances of where the conversational maxims were being flouted, by giving an example of each conversational maxim. The flouting of the conversational maxims will be exemplified with conversations from the series.

The first example is of a flout of the maxim of quality. In this example the study group is being introduced to a break-dancing contest, where Jeffrey is commenting on how he feels about the contest (13):

(13) Shirley: What should we name our break-dancing team?
      Jeffrey: I'm going to hang myself in the closet.

In example (13), Jeffrey is flouting the maxim of quality in order to respond to Shirley's question. The actual flouting happens when Jeffrey says *I'm going to hang myself in the closet*, which is not true. Since he is not misleading Shirley, this creates an implicature which tells Shirley that he is very unhappy about the idea to start a break-dancing group.

The second example is of a flout of the maxim of quantity. In this example, Annie is describing the end of the world, which is happening outside of their cabin, and Britta wants to go outside (14):

(14) Annie: Locusts, tornadoes and frogs.
      Britta: I don't care, I lived in New York.

In example (14), the maxim of quantity is being flouted, since Britta is responding with less information than is required, and this creates an implicature telling us that because she has
lived in New York she has nothing to fear and the dangers that lurk outside are nothing compared to the dangers of New York.

The third example is of a flout of the maxim of relation. In this example, Troy has been sleeping at Pierce's house, when one morning he discovers Pierce's mother lying dead on the floor. When Troy comes to school he is very upset due to the discovery, and the study group is comforting him when Pierce comes in and explains what is going to happen to his mother (15):

(15) Pierce: When technology advances, they will extract her body vapors and recondense it to a solid state, and before you know, mom will be in the kitchen making me and Troy sandwiches.
    Troy: (Troy breaks down in tears)
    Jeffrey: You guys hear about that turtle in China? Two packs a day.

In example (15), Jeffrey is flouting the maxim of relation, since he is not responding to Pierce’s comments about his mother’s transition, but instead tells the group about a turtle who smokes. The flouting of the maxim of relation is due to the situation, where Troy is very sensitive to the comments about Pierce’s dead mother, and Jeffrey changes the topic in order to make Troy feel better.

The fourth and final example is of a flout of the maxim of manner. In this example Britta gets the news that an old friend is in a Syrian prison, due to a protest (16):

(16) Britta: I haven't been tear-gassed in such a long time.
    Shirley: Well you are on a new path now.
    Britta: Oh goodie, a new path. Is it lined with credit cards, flat-screen TV? Does it go by an IKEA? Maybe I don't want a new path or any path.

In example (16), Britta is flouting the maxim of manner. The length of Britta's response to *well you are on an new path now* creates an implicature which implies that she is not happy with her current situation, and that she would rather be doing what her friend does.

### 3.3 Problems of categorization

There can be some difficulty in identifying all instances of flouts in the chosen episodes, since some cases can be vague and maybe represent a violation rather than a flouting of the maxims. Bousfield (2008:23) explains the differences between the two to be that violation of a maxim is a covert non-observance of a maxim, whereas a flouting of a maxim is an intentional non-observance of a maxim, to which the speaker is notably saying something that is implied beyond what is said, and also understood by its interlocutor. Of importance
here is that the flout needs to be understood by the interlocutors of the conversation, which can be difficult to determine. Likewise, it is hard to decide whether the speaker intends to mislead the interlocutors or not. An example of where a case of flouting may or may not occur, which I decided to exclude, is (17):

(17) Britta: Come on Annie, you know guys are giving you money due to the whole sexy school girl routine.
Annie: I have a routine?
Britta: Yeah, you know the one you use posture as an excuse to stick out your chest. You laugh at guy’s unfunny jokes, pretending not to know that they have a sock with your name on it.
Annie: That’s me, and if guys want to make a puppet out of me, that is hardly your concern.

Example (17) can be seen as a case of a flouting of the maxim of quantity, if it was not for the fact that Annie does not appear to understand the implicature which Britta is conveying. These types of examples will not be used in the study, since the interlocutors do not show that they understand the implicature that is created. In addition, some flouts might have been overlooked, due me not being a native speaker of English and that it I alone watched and identified the flouts.

In some instances there was more than one maxim flouted and this created a problem in how to count the flouts. For example, some instances flouted both the maxim of quantity and quality, in these cases I focused on the maxim that was central to the interpretation of the joke; i.e. certain flouts had greater impact than others, and I chose the one that created the comic effect. An example of this can be seen in (32), where Annie is flouting the maxim of quantity, but Abed makes the flout which holds the comic effect, i.e. Abed’s flout was included in the study but not Annie’s.

The figures that are presented in section 4.1 are approximate; i.e., some instances flouts might have been overlooked or simply not used since I was not able to identify them.

4. Analysis and results

In this section of the paper there will be an account of the results. Section 4.1 will present the quantitative part of the study, i.e. the number of flouts, what flouts were used most frequently and what character utters them. Section 4.2 will present how the characters made use of flouts; each character will be presented in an individual subsection.
4.1 Quantitative results

In this subsection there will be a presentation of the quantitative parts of the study. The first part of the subsection will present the number of flouts that were identified in the eight episodes of *Community* on which the study is based.

In the study I identified 75 instances of flouts of the conversational maxims for comic effect. The number of instances of flouting varied in frequency from episode to episode, where some episodes featured flouts more often than others. I also discovered that some of the conversational maxims were flouted more often than others. The number of flouts can be seen in Figure 1, where the distribution of the maxims is presented. As can be seen in Figure 1, the maxim of quantity was flouted the most, followed by the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner.

![Figure 1. Number and frequency of maxims flouted in eight episodes of *Community*.](image)

What I also found was that the main characters of the series used different flouts for comic effect, and there were some characters that used flouts more than others. Some of the flouts that I identified were also used by characters outside the main cast. The flouts made by characters outside the main cast are not included in the results.
As seen in Figure 2, the majority of the flouts identified in these eight episodes were not evenly distributed among the main characters of the show and as can been seen, Jeffrey was the character who flouted the most, followed by Britta, Pierce, Troy, Annie, Abed and Shirley. The reason why certain characters flouted more than others will be explained in the next section.

### 4.2 Characters’ use of flouts

In this section there will be an analysis of the flouts used by each character. The order of presentation will be based on the number of flouts they uttered, beginning with the character who uttered the largest number of flouts, Jeffrey.

#### 4.2.1 Jeffrey

The first character that will be presented in this section is Jeffrey. In the eight episodes that were observed, I identified that Jeffrey flouted the maxims 26 times, and since he did not just flout one of the conversational maxims, there will be a presentation of how many times he flouted each of the maxims. In these eight episodes he flouted the maxim of quality 12 times,
the maxim of quality 11 times, the maxim of relation two times and the maxim of manner once. Hence, the majority of the flouts were of the maxims quality and quantity. Jeffrey often flouted the maxim of quality in situations where he was commenting on people’s bad behavior or in cases where he felt discontent when certain situations had negative outcomes. Example (18) shows how Jeffrey flouted the maxim of quality to express feelings of discontent (18):

(18) In this example Abed and Jeffrey are discussing a fake Pulp Fiction briefcase which Jeffrey bought in the belief that it was the original. The person that sold the briefcase had been in contact with Abed before via an internet based auction site.

Abed: He exaggerates, I bought Indiana Jones' real whip from him. He makes about seven a year.

Jeffrey: I thought I flushed a bunch of money down the toilet. But it is great to know that the real Pulp Fiction briefcase is safe somewhere.

In example (18), the briefcase that Jeffrey mentions had been accidentally combusted earlier that evening and he is now feeling discontent about the whole situation. As mentioned by Abed, the merchandise that the guy sold Jeffrey was a copy or a fake replica of the real prop. Jeffrey is expressing his discontent by saying something that he intentionally does not believe to be true with the sentences I thought I flushed a bunch of money down the toilet and But it is great to know that the real Pulp Fiction briefcase is safe somewhere. In the sentence where Jeffrey expressed how he had wasted his money, Jeffrey means the opposite of what he is saying, since the briefcase he bought was not the original briefcase from the movie; i.e. Jeffrey deliberately said something that was not true to create an implicature. As a matter of fact, he had wasted his money by buying a replica. An implicature is also created when Jeffrey utters the sentence about how he is happy that the original briefcase is safe. This is also untrue, since the briefcase holds no value to him, it is only valuable when it was intended as a gift to his friend. Again, he means the opposite of what he says. These instances where the maxim of quality was flouted to express discontent were among the most frequent.

The other situation where Jeffrey flouted the quality maxim was when he wanted to correct people on their bad behavior. An example of when he flouts one of the maxims to correct people's behavior is (19):

(19) Jeffrey: But here is a question I would like to pass on to you, from every son to every crap dad that had ever lived: so what? I'm done with you, he is done with you, the world is done with you.
In example (19), Jeffrey is berating Pierce’s father, because the father is very narrow-minded; he is making racist and homophobic comments about every member of the study group. In this case Jeffrey is flouting the maxim of quality with the utterance the world is done with you, which is the same as saying that everyone in the world is done with him. This creates an implicature telling the hearer that Pierce’s father’s racist and homophobic views are obsolete in the modern world. These types of situations were common when Jeffrey flouted the maxim of quality.

The instances where Jeffrey flouted the maxim of quantity were either in situations where he commented on himself, his appearance or situations. In addition, Jeffrey also flouted the maxim of quantity in situations where he gave advice or help to the members of the study group. An example of when Jeffrey flouts the maxim of quantity in order to comment on his appearance can be seen in (20):

(20) Jeffrey: Let’s make this party fast and furious, in that order.

In example (20), the study group is celebrating Halloween and are dressed up for the occasion, and Jeffrey is dressed as one of the main cast members of the movie Fast and Furious. The absence of information given by Jeffrey is flouting the maxim of quantity and since he is dressed up as one of the characters from the movie and tells the study group to party fast and furious, in that order he is implying that they should party in that fashion. At the same time it is a pun on the film title. Another example of when Jeffrey is flouting the maxim of quantity is when he is insulting other people (21):

(21) Pierce: My dad is going to disown me!
Jeffrey: Oh no, then you will be free from him forever. You’ll never have to cower at the sound of his voice or shudder every time you see an elephant.

In example (21), Jeffrey is commenting on Pierce's choice to hold a party for the gay community, which Pierce thinks will upset his father who is likely to disown him. Jeffrey is flouting the maxim of quantity with the utterance shudder every time you see an elephant, which is not enough information given to understand what he means on a direct level and this creates an implicature that tells the interlocutor Pierce that Jeffrey refers to his father, due to the fact that the father’s head piece is made out of ivory. The father wears the ivory head piece all the time. These instances where Jeffrey flouted the maxim of quantity were either to comment on himself or to insult other people to create comic effect.
The instances when the maxim of relation was flouted were only two. The first was when Jeffrey wanted to help ease Troy's trauma, as can be seen in example (15) above, and the other instance was when Jeffrey felt uncomfortable while he discussed a topic with Britta and he flouted the maxim of relation to counter her argument. Only once did Jeffrey flout the maxim of manner; in that instance the purpose was to give an insult.

4.2.2 Britta

The second character that will be presented is Britta. In the eight episodes I identified ten instances where Britta flouted the maxims for comic effect, i.e. she did not at all flout the maxims as frequently as Jeffrey. I identified five instances where Britta flouted the maxim of quantity, two instances where the maxim of quality was flouted, two instances where the maxim of relation was flouted and one instance where the maxim of manner was flouted.

The instances where I observed that Britta was flouting the maxim of quantity were either in situations where she used a flout in order to give an insult or where she described herself. An example when Britta flouted the maxim of quantity to give an insult can be seen in (22):

(22) Britta: Excuse me girls you are sitting in our seats.
Girls: Excuse me, what did you say?
Britta: I didn't know you were deaf, I suspected you were blind from the outfit.

In example (22), Britta is insulting one of the girls in the conversation by giving too little information when she says I suspected you were blind from the outfit, which creates an implicature telling the interlocutor that the dress was so ugly that she cannot have seen it herself, i.e. Britta implies that the girl has no sense of fashion. The other situations when Britta flouted the maxim of quantity happened when she was describing herself. An example of when she describes herself by flouting the maxim of quantity can be seen in (14) above.

The instances where Britta flouted the maxim of quality were either to comment on bad behavior or to add insult, and either case only happened once. The situations where Britta flouted the maxim of relation were when she wanted to feel important. An example where Britta flouts the maxim of relation can be seen in (23):

(23) Jeffrey: You're the best kiddo
Britta: Do you know what else was the best? The rainforest. Too bad the fascist oligarchs are raping them to make hamburgers

In example (23), the study group is encouraging Annie to form a U.N. model group, when Britta comes in and says something completely different to change the subject. The flouting
of the maxim of relation in this case creates an implicature which tells the interlocutors that she also wants to change the world and do things that are important to the world. The instance where Britta is flouting the maxim of manner is similar to the instances where she is flouting the maxim of relation, in that she often flouted those maxims when she wanted to show off. An example of when she is flouting the maxim of manner can be seen in (16). The flouting in case (16) demonstrates how Britta wants to show off.

4.2.3 Pierce

Pierce is the third character that will be presented. I identified ten instances where Pierce flouted the conversational maxims. Six times Pierce flouted the maxim of quality, three times he flouted the maxim of quantity and once he flouted the maxim of relation. Pierce flouted three of the conversational maxims but never the maxim of manner. Pierce was not the only character not to flout the maxim of manner. Some of the other characters did not flout all maxims either.

The instances where Pierce flouted the maxim of quality happened in two different situations. Pierce flouted the maxim of quality either by insulting other characters or by saying something awkward. An example of when he is flouting the maxim of quality in an awkward situation is demonstrated in (24):

(24)

Jeffrey: So you were attracted to him?
Pierce: The only thing I am attracted to is taking his ass to court and eating his ass alive.

In example (24), Pierce is upset that a transsexual man has used his brand of wipes in a music video, and therefore he wants to sue the man in question. Pierce also uttered that he found the man to be attractive before he found out he was a man, which he later denounced. In this instance Pierce is flouting the maxim of quality by telling the interlocutors something that is not true, which in this case is the eating his ass segment. The sentence creates an implicature telling the interlocutors that he would like to sue him for a great deal of money. He picks up on Jeffrey’s implied comment that he is attracted sexually to the man by using the taboo word ass in the utterance taking his ass to court and eating his ass alive. The other situation where Pierce flouts the maxim of quality to insult people can be seen in example (25):

(25)

Abed: So that was us and you are still Magnum?
Pierce: Still am, Pakistan, wanna try me?
In example (25), Pierce has told a story in which he is the character Magnum. In the utterance Pierce is flouting the maxim of quality to insult Abed and he utters the word *Pakistan* with a harsh and condescending tone. In this case Pierce is uttering *Yes I am, Pakistan*, in which he refers to Abed as *Pakistan*, and since Abed cannot be a country and he does not originate from Pakistan, the utterance creates an implicature telling the interlocutor that Pierce is basing that utterance on the way Abed looks.

The instances when Pierce was flouting the maxim of quantity were in situations where he mentioned something positive about a situation. An example of when Pierce flouts the maxim of quantity is (26):

(26) **Abed:** We sewed your butt to your chest.  
**Pierce:** No! Wait! Ha! You fools, by sewing my butt to my chest, you have given me boobs that I can touch all day.

In example (26), the implicature is that Pierce is very fond of breasts and that is not expressed directly, but his utterance hints that this is the case. In this case the flouting of the maxim of quantity is used to point out Pierce's advantage and that is the most common use of that particular flout from Pierce's side. The one instance where Pierce flouted the maxim of relation happened when he was trying to fit in by making an awkward statement shown in (27):

(27) **Fellow student:** What kind of cookies do you want at the party, we have peanut butter and chocolate chip?  
**Pierce:** Rainbow, bitches!

In example (27), two homosexual men are giving two options of what to serve at his party, at which Pierce makes the utterance *Rainbow, bitches*. This utterance is irrelevant to the question they are asking, i.e. Pierce is flouting the maxim of relation by saying something irrelevant to the conversation. In this situation the implicature is created when Pierce says *Rainbow, bitches* which tells the interlocutors that he does not care what cookies are going to be served and that the question is “gay” and they should bring whatever cookies they want. This was the only utterance where Pierce flouts the maxim of relation; the utterance was made with the same awkwardness as when he flouted the maxim of quality and quantity.

### 4.2.4 Annie

The fourth character that will be presented is Annie. Altogether, Annie flouted the conversational maxims four times. In these episodes I found that Annie only flouted the maxim of quantity. The instances where Annie flouted the maxim of quantity were either
when she was passing on information from someone else or when she was insulting someone. An example of where Annie is flouting the maxim of quantity to pass on information is (28):

(28) Annie: Fourth floor, 470, first he said it was 69. I want to rub Purell\(^2\) on my brain.

In example (28), Annie is passing on information where a person from whom they are going to steal information has his room. She flouts the maxim of quantity by giving out too much information, in this case the sentence *first he said it was 69*, which creates an implicature telling the interlocutors that the man whom they were stealing information from was hitting on Annie with a sexual reference. The other situation where Annie is flouting the maxim of quantity was in situations where she insulted someone. An example of Annie insulting someone is (29):

(29) Other Annie: So don’t recognize it.
Jeffrey: The Annie will start her own model U.N
Annie: Yeah, for grownups!

In example (29), Annie is fighting verbally with another student, also called Annie who stole her idea about starting a model U.N. In this instance Annie is flouting the maxim of quantity when she utters *Yeah, for grownups*, which creates an implicature that tells the interlocutor Other Annie that she is not welcome in Annie’s model U.N since she is not acting like a grown up.

4.2.5 Troy

The fifth character that will be presented is Troy. I identified six instances where Troy flouted the conversational maxims. Troy flouted the maxim of quantity three times, the maxim of quality one time, the maxim of relation one time and the maxim of manner one time. The instances where Troy flouted the maxim of quantity were when he turned someone's offer down, as seen in example (30):

(30) Repairman: Thanks, by the way the square thing is a Hampton Bolton and what you just described is a manage shipment.
Troy: Hey I’m just here for the tater tots.

In example (30), Troy is flouting the maxim of quantity by not giving enough information, which creates an implicature telling the interlocutor that he is not interested in becoming a

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\(^2\) Purell is a brand of hand sanitizer.
repairman. The repairman is later trying to convince Troy that becoming a repairman is his vocation; these are the situations where he flouts the maxim of quantity. The situation where Troy is flouting the maxim of quality happens when he is deliberately not telling the interlocutors that he is jealous, with the utterance *I'm not jealous.* The sentence creates an implicature telling the interlocutors that he is jealous, due to the context of the situation. The situation where Troy is flouting the maxim of manner can be seen in example (31):

(31)  
Jeffrey: How old are you guys?  
Troy: The question is not how old we are but when old we are.

In example (31), Abed and Troy are dressed up as their favorite science fiction characters, and with the response to Jeffrey's comment they are creating an implicature that they are responding in a fashion that is likely to have happened in in their favorite series, is called *Inspector Spacetime,* which is a parody of the British sci-fi series *Doctor Who.*

4.2.6 Abed

In the eight episodes, Abed only flouted the maxims four times. He flouted the maxim of quality once and the maxim of quantity three times. The situations where Abed flouted the maxim of quantity was when he confronted someone with an insult as can be seen in example (32):

(32)  
Annie: Britta, look at the arrow, you ran these through the machine upside down.  
Abed: She Brittad it.

In example (32), Abed is flouting the maxim of quantity by saying *She Brittad it* which creates an implicature, since there is not enough information provided at a direct level of what the verb *Brittad* is, but due to the context it is implied that the verb means that someone did something wrong in a fashion that Britta often does. These were the only situations when Abed flouted the maxim of quantity. The situation when he flouted the maxim of quality was when he was responding to comments made about his appearance, as can be seen in example (33). In example (33), Britta is commenting on Troy's and Abed's clothing, and wonders why they were dressing up:

(33)  
Britta: I told you guys, you didn't have to dress up  
Troy: We were wearing this when you called.  
Abed: When we dress up you'll know it.
Abed replies to Britta’s comment with a flouting of the maxim of quality with the sentence *When we dress up you’ll know it*. The utterance is obviously not true since they are wearing costumes. What they are implying is that they did not make an effort to dress up. This was the only time I identified Abed flouting the maxim of quality, whereas Troy flouted this maxim twice.

### 4.2.7 Shirley

Shirley was the character who flouted the maxims the least. Only three instances of Shirley flouting the maxims were identified. The maxim of quality was flouted twice and the maxim of quantity was flouted once. The situations where Shirley flouted the maxim of quality were when she insulted someone, which can be seen in example (34):

(34) Shirley: You both are so different, skinny bitches.

In example (34), Britta and Annie are fighting over whether they should act in a certain way while collecting money for a natural disaster and Shirley is commenting on their behavior. The flouting of the maxim of quality happens when Shirley utters *You both are so different, skinny bitches*, which is the opposite of what she thinks. The implicature is thus that she thinks they are very alike. Flouts of this kind can often express an opinion opposite of what is literally uttered, as seen in the example with the ambulance man in section 2.2. This was seen in some of the characters, where flouts were created when they were expressing something opposite of what was meant. This type of flout is commonly expressed in the series, and mainly uttered by Jeffrey.

Finally, the instance where Shirley flouted the maxim of quantity happened when she was commenting on a decision Annie was about to make, as can be seen in example (35):

(35) Shirley: Be careful Annie, we don’t want this little girl to suck you back to the dark side.

In example (35), Shirley is flouting the maxim of quantity by uttering the sentence *suck you back to the dark side*, which does not give enough information and creates an implicature that tells the interlocutor that she does not want Annie to begin doing drugs again and lose what she has struggled for.
4.3 Discussion of results

In this section I will discuss the different conversational maxims used to create comedy in *Community* and also how and to what extent the different characters flouted the four maxims, to see if the flouts were based on their character. The total number of flouts that I identified during the eight episodes was 75; 34 times the maxim of quantity was flouted, there were 25 instances where the maxim of quality was flouted, 9 instances where the maxim of relation was flouted and 7 instances where the maxim of manner was flouted. An overall majority of the flouts that I identified in the series were thus of the maxims of quantity and quality, while the other two maxims, relation and manner, were not at all flouted as frequently as the other maxims. A reason for that could be that it is easier to identify the maxim of quantity and quality, since it is easier to determine when a character is not telling the truth or when there is a lack of information. The same goes for the maxim of quantity where it is easier to identify when someone is not giving enough information in order for the message to be understood. The maxim of relation is fairly easy to identify since it requires that the character says something irrelevant to a conversation at hand, but I still found that the maxim of relation was not flouted as frequently as the maxims of quantity and quality. The maxim of manner was the hardest to identify since it is hard to distinguish between violations and flouts in this particular case. The maxim of manner was also the least flouted.

In the text below I will summarize the results of each of the characters. My main focus here will be on what purpose were they flouted.

The reason that certain flouts were used more frequently than others is that they seem to be used to bring out certain characteristics in the various characters. For example, the character who flouted the most maxims was Jeffrey. When he flouted the maxim of quality, it was usually either because he was correcting people's behavior or to show his discontent with certain situations. It also appeared that he flouted the maxim of quality in order to help the other members of the study group with their problems and dilemmas. Hence the flouts were a distinguishing feature of Jeffrey's personality: he sees himself as the leader of the study group, and in some cases almost as a parent, and these utterances were made in order to correct or to give advice. Brumark's study (2006) showed that the fathers of the families used flouts of the maxims in order to regulate or to correct the children's behavior, and this is also what Jeffrey did when he was flouting the maxims of quality and quantity. At other times when Jeffrey flouted the maxim of quality it seems to reflect his discontent in a cynical way. His flouts of the maxim of quantity reflect his personality which
is narcissistic. He also flouted the maxim of quantity by giving advice to fellow study group members. He did not flout the maxim of relation and manner as many times as the other two maxims. The maxim of relation was flouted either to defend himself from accusations or to help a member of the study group by changing the subject.

Britta did not flout the maxims as frequently as Jeffrey. She flouted the maxim of quantity in order to tell something about herself. The same was the case with the maxim of relation which she flouted in order to show importance. These two types of flouts were common due to her personality. She is a former social activist and she misses that lifestyle.

Pierce flouted the maxim of quality in order to make awkward remarks and give insults. The other flouts were also linked with Pierce’s personality, for example the maxim of relation which is flouted when he says something irrelevant that creates awkward tension. Pierce never flouted the maxim of manner.

I identified six instances where Troy flouted the maxims for comic effect. He flouted the maxim of quantity the most and only in situations where he turned down an offer. The other maxims were only flouted once each, and were either derived from his interest in movies and TV-series or his naivety.

Annie only flouted the maxim of quantity. The instances where she flouted this maxim were either when she was giving information or when she was insulting someone. It turned out that she only insulted someone when she felt that someone could constitute a threat to her and she does not really appear to want to offend anyone; at least that was the case in the episodes I used in this study.

I identified only four instances were Abed flouted the maxims. Three times Abed flouted the maxim of quantity in order to give an insult to fellow study group members. The maxim of quality was flouted when Abed commented on Jeffrey’s response to what they were wearing. The reason that Abed flouted so few maxims can possibly be ascribed to the fact that Abed has Asperger’s Syndrome which is a form of autism, which gives him trouble understanding actions having to do with emotions, and he also has a hard time understanding implicatures.

Shirley flouted the maxims the least number of times compared to the other characters. The two flouts of the maxim of quality were uttered to insult others. She rarely flouted the maxims since she is often polite and only used flouts when she wanted to hurt someone, which did not happen very often.
5 Summary and conclusion

The first research question sought to find how often the conversational maxims were flouted in order to create comedy. The data that was collected in my study showed that the maxim of quantity was flouted the most times in order to create comedy, i.e., the characters tended to make their utterances shorter than could be expected in order to achieve different effects like insults, to correct behavior etc. Next followed the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner, in that order. Scriptwriters tend to use different strategies in order to create comedy, and one of them is having the characters flout the maxims, as can be seen in the result of this study.

The second research question aimed to see whether there was a difference in what maxims the different characters flouted and how often they did so. The extent to which different characters flouted the maxims varied a great deal. The results show that Jeffrey used the most flouts, a majority of which were flouts of the maxims of quantity and quality. Britta and Pierce were similar in that I found that they flouted a maxim ten times each, but they differed in which maxims they flouted. When Britta flouted the maxims, it was the maxim of quantity that was flouted the most, and when Pierce flouted the maxims it was the maxim of quality. The other three characters were found to flout the maxims much less than the others. Troy, Annie and Abed flouted the maxim of quantity the most, whereas for Shirley, the maxim that was flouted the most was the maxim of quality.

The third research question was about the function of the flouts in the show. The reasons for flouting of the maxims varied. I found that the maxim of quality was flouted in order to insult, to give advice, or to make a statement that creates awkward tension. The maxim of quantity was flouted to give insult, to comment on appearance, to pass on information about different schemes and to comment on something positive in order to create comic effect. The maxim of relation was flouted when a character was changing the topic of conversation, in order for a character to show off, to make them come across as naïve and to create an awkward situation by saying something narrow-minded. The maxim of manner was flouted in order to give an insult or for a character to show off.

In conclusion, one important difference that came out in the results was that some maxims were flouted more than others; i.e. the maxims of quantity and quality were flouted more often than the maxims of relation and manner. Another important difference was that some characters flouted more maxims than others; i.e. Jeffrey flouted the most maxims and Shirley flouted the least. In my analysis I argue that the flouting of maxims reflects the
personalities of the characters, e.g. that the reason why Jeffrey flouted the maxim of quantity was to show his narcissistic characteristics. The reason why some characters used flouts less frequently was also linked with their personalities, as with Annie who only made use of flouts when she felt threatened by a peer, which did not happen very often.

An interesting topic for further research might be to use another comedy series that centers on a group of people to see if the leader or the more dominant character of the group is the one who uses the most flouts, and for what reason. It would be interesting to see if flouting of the conversational maxims is a distinguishing feature of leaders. This can also be interesting to test in real life, to see how different members of a group use flouts in everyday life, for what reasons, and what person in the group flouts the most.
List of References

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Secondary sources


