Sitcom humour as ventriloquism

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Received 8 February 2017; received in revised form 10 May 2017; accepted 11 May 2017

Abstract

Ventriloquism has been used as a source domain to conceptualise a range of different aspects of discourse, meaning-making and understanding, and in Cooren’s (e.g., 2010) view on a communicative constitution of reality even as a model for communication at large. In Telecinematic Discourse (TCD), the language of fictional film and television, the notion that characters onscreen speak on behalf of someone or something else is a particularly tangible representation of the duality of communicative levels by which TCD is usually characterised. Moreover, Goffman’s (1986/1974) canonical understanding of ventriloquism, as well as the employment of the same term in neuroscience, film studies and narrative theory point to additional understandings of ventriloquism that are relevant for the understanding not just of TCD, but also for humour therein. This paper brings together such different views of ventriloquist effects and uses examples from sitcoms to demonstrate how ventriloquism can be used as an alternative to the traditional spatial understanding of the communicative setting of TCD. These examples originate from Anger Management and Two and a Half Men, which are regarded here as two connected acts of ventriloquism, staged by actor Charlie Sheen and producer Chuck Lorre as part of their public feud in 2011. Analysing these scenes through the lens of ventriloquism provides a dynamic view of agency and an understanding of the television audience as active viewers who infer ventriloquists based on the dummy actions encoded in the multimodal text surface.

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Keywords: Anger Management; Communicative levels; Humour; Sitcom; Telecinematic discourse; Two and a Half Men; Ventriloquism

1. Introduction

Participation structures in Telecinematic Discourse (TCD), i.e., the communication in and of fictional film and television, are typically conceptualised with either of two prevalent spatial metaphors: In the duality of simultaneous events that characterise such communication, the actions and interactions within the fictional, or diegetic, world are either understood as embedded within or as resting upon the communication between some form of authorship or sender and the actual audience (see e.g., Bubel, 2006, 2008; Bednarek, 2010; Dynel, 2011; Piazza et al., 2011; Messerli, 2017a). In other words, the real world of authors and viewers is a container in which the diegetic world is placed, or it is a foundation on which a stage is constructed. The diegetic world, on the other hand, is either understood as that stage or as a second container within the first. Humour in such settings may take place in a space that is separated from that of the audience. Situated on that stage or in that second container, it may be a self-contained event that audiences observe by looking up to or into the diegetic space. They are amused from a distance. Or, indeed, humour may transgress the walls of the second container or the height of the stage, and depend upon the audience’s ability to perceive not just humour in the diegetic...
world, but also the container or the stage in or on which it occurs. This second type of humour requires awareness of the 
constructedness of the fictional artefact (but not necessarily the manner in which it is constructed).

These two spatial ontological metaphors function well to explain the participation structures of TCD and of humour 
therein, if participant roles are understood as static and dependent upon the type of artefact and perhaps the particular 
audience receiving it. I will argue here, however, that such a spatial understanding of the dual or even multiple 
communication channels of TCD falls short when audiences and individual audience members are thought of in a more 
dynamic sense, as participants that are positioned and repositioned by diegetic events. Such a dynamic conceptualisation 
is however necessary especially when it comes to the understanding of comedy and humour (see Brock, 2015; Messerli, 
2016). I propose then to observe the communicative setting of humour in TCD through the lens of ventriloquism, which has 
been a fruitful source domain for the concretisation of a vast array of different concepts in different disciplines – many of 
them relevant for the way in which communication in and of audiovisual artefacts can be theorised. By discussing the 
relevant literature in Section 2 and applying the empirical findings and theoretical concepts to the domain of TCD in 
Section 3, I will approach this particular setting from a new vantage point and demonstrate the usefulness of ventriloquism, 
which puts the focus on the different agents that are involved in communication with the television viewers, for the 
understanding of the dynamic audience. This discussion is done with the help of excerpts from two American sitcoms, Two 
and Half Men (CBS, 2003–2015) and Anger Management (FX, 2012–2014). The central research question this article 
asks is deceptively simple: How do we need to understand and how can we successfully model the participation structure 
of telecinematic communication in general and humour therein in particular? Using research from a range of disciplines, 
some of which are not typically considered when theorising humour and the pragmatics of humour, my conceptualisation 
of telecinematic humour as ventriloquism offers an audience-centred and performance-based conceptualisation of 
comedy that highlights the different agents from which the communication is ultimately perceived to emanate. The fictional 
characters through which humour is performed are understood as endpoints of multiple chains of agencies, with these 
chains being dependent both on the experiential and communal knowledge of the audience and on the context that is 
being constructed within the particular artefact itself.

2. Ventriloquism in different strands of research

I follow the view here that humour can be understood in terms of incongruity and resolution in the sense of Suls (1972), 
i.e., stimuli in a linear narrative activate a narrative frame that evokes certain expectations in readers or viewers, with each 
new stimulus being measured against those existing expectations. As long as new stimuli are congruous with viewer 
expectations, no humour will ensue – if, however, a narrative element occurs that does not fit expectations but whose 
presence in the narrative is nonetheless plausible, the readers or viewers will find the resulting resolvable incongruity 
humorous. In the case of sitcoms and more generally TCD, these stimuli occur as part of staged and mediated 
performances, and as a result telecinematic humour is multimodal and generally multifaceted both with regard to its 
production and reception. While I will return to the exact setup of sitcom humour in the discussion of examples in Section 3, 
I want to first propose here an understanding of the communicative setting of telecinematic humour that serves as a useful 
alternative to the extant spatial models. This understanding of communication and humour in film and television as a form 
of ventriloquism will be outlined in the following sections. I will start by discussing various ways in which ventriloquism and 
ventriloquism effects have been adapted in different disciplines to explain a range of different phenomena – all of them will 
be shown to be relevant for the understanding of telecinematic humour and thus inform the view I propose in Section 3.

2.1. Perceptual ventriloquism

A first understanding of ventriloquism that needs to be taken into account here stems from research in cognitive 
psychology on multi- and cross-modal perception. Interested in cross-modal effects on perception, i.e., whether co-
occurring visual and auditory stimuli affect the perception of each of the two modalities, Vroomen and de Gelder (2004: 
142) describe the well-documented phenomenon of the ventriloquism effect as follows: “[W]hen auditory and visual 
stimuli occur in close temporal and spatial proximity, the perceptual system assumes that a single event has occurred.” A 
prime example is indeed the performance of a ventriloquist. It depends upon the illusion that the voice the audience hears 
when the puppet’s mouth opens and closes emanates from the puppet itself rather than the puppeteer who moves it with 
herself: Because of the visual stimulus provided by the visibly articulating puppet (and in the absence of a competing 
visual stimulus in the form of lip movements by the puppeteer), the audience’s perception of the sound shifts enough into 
direction of the puppet to make puppet action and voice appear to be a single event. In a range of experimental 
settings, Vroomen and de Gelder (2004) showed that this effect is very robust even when participants were trained to 
ignore the visual stimulus, and that “[a]ttention towards the visual distracter is not needed to obtain a ventriloquism effect” 
(Vroomen and de Gelder, 2004: 144).
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