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Virginie Iché

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Cognitive Distortions and Hilarious Implementations of the Principles of Relevance Theory: The Case of Coach in* Cheers *(NBC, 1982-1985)

Virginie Iché, MCF, Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA EA 741

Cognitive distortions can result from two major sources: faulty processing of the physical world (mainly due to perceptual disabilities), or erroneous treatment of the information processed (due to flawed or poor inferential disabilities or to psychopathological disorders impacting the interlocutor's inferential abilities). Cognitive impairments in otherwise healthy individuals—such as sudden vision loss, comprehension difficulties, language impairment, attention or memory disorders, to name but a few—are cause for worry and medical scrutiny, since they are usually the sign of brain decline, depression or even dementia. Additionally, these distortions impact the way speakers interpret their cognitive environment [1] and result in unconventional behavioral or discursive reactions.

Coach, one of the main characters of the first three seasons of the American sitcom *Cheers* (1982-1985), displays many cognitive misfires over the episodes—all of which take place (almost exclusively) in a bar in Boston, run by a former baseball player named Sam Malone and tended by Ernie Pantusso, nicknamed "Coach" because he used to be a coach. Coach's cognitive abilities are repeatedly shown to be flawed—he is unable to understand non-literal utterances, has recurrent memory lapses (even concerning his own name) and has a hard time analyzing his environment. The canned laughter that follows Coach's cues suggests the cognitive impairments he suffers from and the discursive consequences these distortions have on the situation and the dialogue, are nothing to worry about though—they even prove to be one of the sitcom's comic features. Even if Coach has difficulties to process his cognitive environment, he is not portrayed as an irrational character. However, his recurrent cognitive misfires seemingly make him stand out from the rest of the characters of *Cheers*, at least in terms of cognitive functioning, so much so that the following question may be asked: are the principles of relevance theory [2] (which I will present in the next section) still valid for such a character? In other words, is Coach's cognition really geared to the maximization of relevance, like any other speaker? Or is he unable to maximize relevance, due to his cognitive troubles?

[1] Defined by Sperber and Wilson as "the set of all the facts that he [an individual] can perceive or infer: all the facts that are manifest to him" (1995: 39).
[2] As defined by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, 1995.

This paper is thus in line with Dynel who argues that film discourse [3], though fictional and scripted, evokes "an illusion of real-life conversations [4]". This implies that similar analytical frameworks can be used to study both types of discourse. As Dynel puts it, scriptwriters take into account the surrounding reality and are considered to be very skillful if the dialogues they write exploit the same principles, norms and conventions of everyday communication:

> Whether intuitively employed by regular language users or carefully constructed by a script writer and then rendered by actors under the director's supervision, an interaction always operates on the same linguistic resources, in accordance with deeply ingrained, and frequently only intuitively felt, communication rules [5].

Dynel also reminds us that, although usually "mispronunciations, overlaps or self-corrections with which real-life discourse is replete will be scarce in films […], if a given role or interaction demands this, such communicative obstacles [or similar obstacles resulting from cognitive problems] will obviously be found in film discourse [6]". The examples she provides—Leonardo DiCaprio's Arnie Grape in *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Lasse Hallström, 1993) and Tom Hanks's Forrest Gump in the movie of the same name (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), show how scriptwriters can, obviously, write dialogues and roles for cognitively impaired characters. Additionally, though some may argue that the language featured in situation comedies is different from naturally-occurring language, Quaglio showed that *Friends* shares the core linguistic characteristics of face-to-face conversation—a conclusion which, he feels, is valid for all television dialogue in American situation comedies, even if his own study is limited to one particular show [7]. Consequently, in this paper, the interactions between Coach and the other characters of *Cheers* will be examined through the lens of pragma-cognitive-linguistic frameworks, like real-life conversations. This chapter will argue that, contrary to what may be thought, cognitively impaired (but otherwise rational) Coach is not an exception to Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory; his reactions are nothing but attempts to see relevance in his interlocutors' utterances. Accordingly, Coach does implement the principles of relevance theory, though, due to his difficulties to correctly assess his environment and/or retrieve significantly relevant memories, his cues end up being hilarious implementations of the principles of relevance theory.

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[3] Dynel uses the term "film discourse" in reference to "fictional characters' communication in feature films, as well as in series and serials series," even though, as she herself acknowledges, "technically speaking, the two are not films" (41).
[4] Dynel, Marta, 2011, p. 43.
[5] Dynel, Marta, 2011, p. 44.
[6] Dynel, Marta, 2011, p. 45.
[7] Quaglio, Paulo, 2009, 14.

"What the hell are we talking about this now for?" (Season 1 Episode 5 [8]). This question is asked by Coach, after Sam, his friend and current boss, reminds him of words of encouragement he uttered some eight years before, words which apparently stuck with Sam and helped him give his best against a certain Charlie Spikes during the last inning of a baseball game that could have been his last one—"Go get him." The anecdote is meant to inspire Coach and get him to talk to his daughter in order to stop her from making the mistake of marrying someone who does not love her. However, as is abundantly made clear by the intensive phrase "the hell," Coach has no idea why Sam is referring to that event—and Sam has to explain why his anecdote is applicable to Coach's situation. In short, Coach fails to see the relevance of Sam's words and even seems to doubt the fact that Sam's reminiscence has any bearing at all on what is going on at that particular moment.

Coach's reaction seems to disprove the validity of Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory (1995, 2004). Sperber and Wilson's alternative to Grice's inferential model of communication is grounded on the idea that hearers expect their interlocutors to issue relevant stimuli that are precise and predictable enough to steer them towards their interlocutors' meaning. Sperber and Wilson argue that the search for basic relevance is a feature of human cognition (contrary to Grice's Cooperative Principle) and that human cognitive systems have evolved in such a way that humans have developed a tendency to maximize relevance (while they have *not* developed a tendency to cooperate, an idea which was implied by Grice's theory). Sperber and Wilson's relevance theory rests on two main principles: the first is a cognitive principle—"Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance [9]"—the second a communicative one—"Every act of ostensive communication [10] conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance [11]". According to Sperber and Wilson, any input is deemed relevant by the hearer if it yields a positive cognitive effect, and if the effort required in order to achieve this cognitive effect is small or worth the processing effort. Positive cognitive effects can take many forms: contextual implications or "the strengthening, revision or abandonment of available assumptions [12]". Hearers try to understand their interlocutors' utterances and intentions by testing interpretive hypotheses and following "a path of least effort in

[8] The references to the various episodes will henceforth be shortened, with S standing for "Season" and E standing for "episode."
[9] Sperber, Dan and Wilson, Deirdre, 1995, 260.
[10] Sperber and Wilson replaced "ostensive communication" with "ostensive stimulus" (612) in their 2004 article, so as to make it clear that they include any type of stimulus, whether verbal or non-verbal.
[11] Sperber, Dan and Wilson, Deirdre, 1995, 260.
[12] Wilson, Deirdre and Sperber, Dan, 2004, 608.

computing cognitive effects [13]", and stop when their expectations of relevance are satisfied. Sperber and Wilson underline the fact that hearers may reach false conclusions, since the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure is a non-demonstrative inferential process, but they insist that "it is the best a rational hearer can do [14]".

Both Sam and Coach are characterized as rational (enough) characters in *Cheers*. Though Sam used to drink too much and eventually relapses in season 3, he never acts or speaks irrationally. Coach is also depicted as a fairly rational character: he is a good bartender, who knows how to greet customers, namely Norm, for whom he pours a beer whenever he comes in. Coach is a good friend, too, who, as Fallows puts it, "offers support and advice to everyone at the bar [15]". He helped Sam get sober when he first had his drinking problem, and later asked Diane to come back to the bar to help him get sober again after they split up (S3E2). That particular episode even shows how cunning Coach can be: he convinces Diane to work at Cheers again (though she swore never to set foot there again) by arguing Sam needs her around not to drink any more, while persuading Sam (who did not want to see her any more) to let her come back (supposedly for her own good—so that she does not go back to the "nut house", the sanatorium she went to after her break-up with Sam), and while talking Frasier (a psychiatrist and Diane's new boyfriend) into agreeing to letting Diane and Sam work together again, allegedly for them to demystify their romance. Coach proves to be ingenious on more than one occasion indeed: he understands when it is time for Sam to stop talking through the pros and cons of dating his agent with Diane and start doing something about it (S1E13); he knows how to break bad news to people (he cushions the blow by making up some dreadful news first, as in S1E21); he sees through Cliff's lies (in S2E16, when Cliff argues he stayed out of a fight with an aggressive customer because of his knowledge of karate, Coach says: "I hate to ask, but if you do know karate, why did you have to bring Lewis in with you?"); he plays the "pathetic-old-man bit" (Coach's own words in S2E22) to have people take an active part in the annual Cheers picnic.

If Coach is rational (enough), as these examples prove, and Sam a rational communicator, why does Coach not get Sam's point and ask: "What the hell are we talking about this now for?" in the fifth episode of the first season? According to relevance theory, a rational hearer will only decline to process an ostensive stimulus because she believes that her cognitive efforts will be too large and the contextual effects obtained by processing the stimulus will be

[13] Wilson, Deirdre and Sperber, Dan, 2004, 613.
[14] Wilson, Deirdre and Sperber, Dan, 2004, 614.
[15] Fallows, Randall, 2000, 175.

too small. This seems to be what Coach does, here, when he refuses to process the anecdote delivered by Sam. He will not see the analogy between past Sam and present Coach (who yet both need(ed) help) and between past Charlie Spikes and present Roy (who are the adversary in each case), even if doing so would save his beloved daughter from marrying an obnoxious and unscrupulous man—which certainly qualifies as a very large contextual effect. Sam's intention was, however, clear (as any rational viewer of the show can testify): he wants Coach to put into practice the piece of advice ("Go get him.") he gave to Sam himself. The effort to process such a stimulus should have been small enough (Sam's utterance is not overly sophisticated)—and Coach eventually gets it, after Sam's second ostensive stimulus ("Coach, go get him."), which seems to be nothing but a repetition of the first ostensive stimulus (with a tiny difference, the vocative expression "Coach"). The main principles of relevance theory seem, therefore, to be disproved by Coach's initial vehement reaction, yet implemented in his final reaction "Get it."

Coach does not seem to be an exception to the principles of relevance theory as much as a reminder that every individual cannot maximize relevance in the same way—a point that Sperber and Wilson do hint at [16], albeit in passing: "It [What counts as relevant enough] also varies with the degree of intellectual alertness of the addressee." Indeed, Coach's cognitive impairments, which his frequent headaches [17] are a sign of and his repeated head traumas [18] the probable cause of, can be put forward as explanations for his difficulty to implement the principles of relevance theory. His main impairments are not sensory or perceptual (Coach is not hard of hearing, nor does he have vision problems), but are related to several other cognitive domains, such as concentration and attention, language, memory and inferential capacities. Coach sometimes has a hard time keeping his attention focused on the topic of discussion. In S1E4, when Carla wonders how Sam could answer the question "what's your greatest memory in baseball?" (a question that sportscaster Dave Richards is expected to ask him), Coach recalls an exciting memory—yet, the memory of an event that Sam would not be

[16] Sperber, Dan, and Wilson, Deirdre, 1995, 161.

[17] They are either explicitly mentioned, as in S1E1 or S2E7, or implied by Coach's putting his hand on his forehead, as in S1E2, S1E10 or S2E15.

[18] Coach explains in S1E3 that he specialized in getting hit by pitches when he played baseball (Coach: "I must've got hit by 100 fastballs.")—and this "specialty" of his is referred to again in S1E22 (Coach: "Diane, you're asking a guy who's taken a lot of fast balls in the head. Are you sure you want to ask the question?") and in S3E8 (Norm: "A little rap on the head. Doesn't even hurt any more." / Coach: "Normie's right. I got rapped in the head all the time in baseball. I never went to a doctor."). Coach also unveils that he used to intentionally hurt himself (and very often fall on his head) to attract young ladies' attention in S1E9, a "seduction strategy" he uses again in that very episode. Finally, Coach tells Diane that whenever he is extremely angry, he bangs his head on the bar (S1E8).

likely to mention in an interview at all since it involves a certain Bobby Mercer hitting a home run off him. Similarly, later in the season, Diane shares the pain of losing her childhood pet and asks Coach if he ever had a pet. Coach's reaction shows him yet again losing track of the conversation topic:

> Coach: Look, I never had a pet, Diane, but my grandfather had a dog, and I loved him very much.
> Diane: Hmm. What did you call him?
> Coach: Grandpa.
> Diane: I meant the dog. (S1E14)

Coach also displays many language comprehension difficulties [19]. Reading certainly proves to be a challenge for him—he thinks he is going to finally finish the novel he is reading six years after he first opened the book (S1E1). And Coach is recurrently portrayed as a poor reader; the audience learns later in season 1 that his teammates called him Red, not because he had red hair, but because "[he] read a book" (S1E20), and Coach declares "That's the only line of Shakespeare I ever understood" after Diane-Desdemona realizes Andrew-Othello is no longer play-acting and really calls for help in the middle of the strangulation scene: "Help! This psycho's trying to kill me!" (S2E4). Arguably, Coach's reading comprehension difficulties come, at least in part, from his difficulty to process elaborate words (whether Latinate, such as "futility [20]", "dispel", "misconception [21]", "geneticist [22]" etc., or technical, such as "participles [23]" or "metaphor [24]") and sometimes even rather frequently used words, such as "threshold" as in S2E12:

> Customer: Hey, way to go, Coach! You did it. You must have a high threshold of pain.
> Coach: I don't know the meaning of the word.
> Customer: Pretty tough guy, there, huh?
> Norm: No, he doesn't know what "threshold" means.
> Coach: Thanks, Normie.

These comprehension problems have to do with Coach's faulty memory retrieval abilities, since vocabulary comprehension partly relies on semantic memory, a subcategory of long-

[19] TV director James Edward Burrows and writers and producers Glen Charles and Les Charles obviously did nonetheless not intend Coach to have language production difficulties—Coach neither stutters, nor has a hard time finding his words. In all three seasons, the only pronunciation problem referred to actually turns out to be a logical problem: Annette: "I'm Carla's sister, Annette Lozupone." / Coach: "What an interesting name. How do you pronounce it?" (S2E2).

[20] Customer: "Do you sense, as I do, that this conversation is an exercise in futility?" / Coach: "Oh, thank you very much." (S1E6)

[21] Customer [Priest]: "Allow me to dispel your misconceptions." / Coach [Kneeling down; his hand on his forehead]: "Oh, thank you, father." (S1E11)

[22] Diane: "Walter happens to be a distinguished geneticist." / Coach: "Oh, he studies genets." (S1E17)

[23] Diane: "Oh, Coach . . . sometimes you get your participles in the wrong place." / Coach: "Well, I slept on my stomach last night." (S2E5)

[24] Cliff [Talking about Norm's relationship with his wife, Vera]: "I mean you've sort of hit bottom now. It's time to make repairs, fix the old engine and get back out on that highway." / Coach: "Don't tell me you wrecked your car too, Normie." / Cliff: "No, Coach, it's a metaphor." / Coach: "Those are the hardest to get parts for!" (S2E9)

term memory [25]. Coach's long-term memory is definitely flawed. In S1E5, Coach says he remembers part of the "double-header against Cleveland on a hot August day, 1974", but when Sam asks: "What part?", Coach answers: "I remember hot." Coach is also shown as unable to retrieve even older personal memories. In S1E21, he initially thinks Sam's relationship with his brother is strained because he used to be cruel to him ("He used to shove his head underwater"), before realizing it was his own brother who used to shove his head underwater. Likewise, in S2E21, Coach declares he is "a wonderful artist". It is only after seeing that the picture he drew of Diane is not as good as he was adamant it would be that he remembers: "It was my brother that had all the artistic talent. Yeah, now I remember. My talent is eating things that aren't food." Coach's short-term memory is also unmistakably poor: he tells a friend about to get operated on that he is glad to hear from him because he "didn't think [his] chances going in there were too good", while the operation is actually to take place the day after the phone call (S1E4); at the end of his workday, he cannot remember whether he drove to Cheers or took the bus in the morning (S1E10); he even forgets the name of the client who asked him to check at Melville's (the restaurant upstairs) whether his table was ready by the time he goes upstairs (S1E11).

Finally, it seems that drawing logical inferences from external stimuli or internal representations proves to be a laborious task for Coach. In S1E2, a (white) customer comes all the way from Seattle (Cheers being located in Boston, as stated before) to talk about his problems to Gus, one of the previous bartenders at Cheers. Coach talks him into trusting him with his problem:

> Coach: Listen, I managed in the minors here, I coached in the majors, I've been a bartender for five years. I've had my share of people with problems. Why don't you gimme a try?
> Customer: Last semester, my son comes home from college with his new fiancé, who's black.
> Coach: And your son's not?
> Norm: Yo, Coach. Get Gus. (S1E2)

While it is perfectly true that a white parent could have a black child, very few speakers would ask their interlocutor for the confirmation that their son is not black in a similar context. The customer never mentioned the fact that his son was not his biological son nor that his wife was not Caucasian, which would have been relevant to this conversation if it were the case. Additionally, the way the customer describes his problem, with a relative clause that places the focus on the fiancé's skin color, markedly presents this piece of information as new. And yet Coach does not process these cues as Norm (or, in all likelihood,

[25] I'm referring here to Alex Martin's 2009 definition: "'Semantic memory' refers to a major division of long-term memory that includes knowledge of facts, events, ideas, and concepts." (p. 561)

the audience) does, nor does he immediately reach the (most logical) conclusion that the customer's son is not black.

In S1E20, Sam feels sorry for Coach for having to listen to a decidedly talkative customer. Coach replies that he was a very nice person though, and "the first person [he] ever met that was actually on the Titanic". However, when Sam says: "He survived the Titanic?", Coach fails to see that this is an instance of what Searle calls indirect speech acts [26] and replies: "I forgot to ask." Coach draws the wrong inference that Sam's reaction implied that he should be able to answer that question after such a lengthy conversation with the customer. Sam's sentence is, in effect, processed by Coach as if it were a question—in Searle's terms, as if it were a directive [27], an "attempt[…] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something [28]". However, it is actually what Searle calls an expressive, a sentence "express[ing] the [speaker's] psychological state […] about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content [29]"—Sam expressing his surprise that this customer, who he thought was tedious, turns out to be one of the most fascinating customers Cheers ever had.

In S2E14, everybody talks about Norm and about the fact that he no longer comes to Cheers as early as he used to:

> Carla: Norm is late again today.
> Sam: Yeah, I noticed. […]
> Carla: You know, he hasn't been here before 5 o'clock all week. You don't suppose Norm has finally got himself a job, do you?
> Cliff: No, no, if Normie had got a job, he'd have told us all about it, you know.
> Coach: Gee, I hope he didn't tell me and I forgot. No, I'd remember forgetting something that big.
> Sam: No, I think Cliff's right. If Norm got a job, he would have made a big deal about it.
> Diane: You know, yesterday I saw something very disturbing. […] Well, on my way here, I saw a fellow, who looked very much like Norman, sneaking in the back door of Melville's kitchen. Now, he looked so much like Norman I said hi to him, but he pulled his coat over his face and ran inside.
> Sam: What would Norm be doing in Melville's kitchen?
> Diane: I think Norman's been reduced to taking a job as a busboy or a dishwasher.
> Cliff: No, no, the man would never stoop to something like that. He probably just went in to beg for table scraps, that's all.
> Sam: Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute, I just thought of something. […] About a week ago, Norm asked me if a real man would wash dishes.
> Cliff: Oh no.
> Carla: I don't believe it.

[26] See John R. Searle, 1969, 1979.
[27] John R. Searle, 1979, p. 14 clarifies that "questions are a subclass of directives since they are attempts by S to get H to answer, i.e. to perform a speech act".
[28] John R. Searle, 1979, 13.
[29] John R. Searle, 1979, 15.

Diane: It's impossible to escape the conclusion.
Coach: I found a way.

Both Sam and Carla observed a change in Norm's habits, which led Carla to test the hypothesis that Norm finally found a job. Diane, who is portrayed as an extremely bright person in the series, then shares her observation about Norm going to Melville's. Though Sam's reaction ("What would Norm be doing in Melville's kitchen?") is a question on the syntactic level, that is to say a directive in Searle's terms, on the pragmatic level, it is, once more, an expressive, communicating Sam's disbelief at the idea that the person that Diane saw really was Norman. Sam's use of the past tense reveals how he rejects this possibility—in keeping with Huddleston's analysis of the past tense as expressing in this type of cases "factual remoteness [30]". Diane's hypothesis, "I think Norman's been reduced to taking a job as a busboy or a dishwasher," proves to be an answer to Sam's surface question as much as it is a rebuttal to what Sam implied—that she could not have seen Sam there. Cliff very paradoxically rejects Diane's assumption, but Sam ends up retrieving some recollection that seems to be in agreement with it. Cliff's and Carla's reactions show that, even if they are still reluctant to accept the conclusion Diane infers from what she witnessed and from Sam's memory (the verb "believe" in Carla's assertion being expressive rather than epistemic), they eventually reach the same one. Coach's reaction is very different from Cliff's, Sam's and Carla's: he is not only unable to accept the idea of Norm being a dishwasher, but he is also completely unable to reach the conclusion that all of his interlocutors ended up forming (albeit not formulating). In the first three seasons of *Cheers*, Coach's inferential capacities are therefore constructed as faulty compared to all of his interlocutors', and not just to Diane's very efficient cognitive system.

Nevertheless, Coach tries hard to strike the best possible balance between the mental cost of processing information (retrieved from his memory or from his representation of reality) and drawing inferences, and the cognitive benefits resulting from such efforts, "enrichments, revisions and reorganisations of existing beliefs and plans, which improve the organism's knowledge and capacity for successful action [31]". In other words, although Coach seems to stand out from the rest of the characters of the first three seasons of *Cheers*, he actually seeks, like them and like any speaker really, to maximize cognitive efficiency. Nicholas Colasanto's acting reveals, in effect, how recurrent Coach's efforts to process what he is told or the

[30] Huddleston, Rodney, 1984, 147.
[31] Sperber, Dan and Wilson, Deirdre, 2002.

conversations around him are: Colasanto repeatedly nods, frowns and keeps his mouth open while looking at his interlocutor, as if Coach were trying to take in everything he is told, in spite of the fact that it is extremely difficult for him to do so. It is not surprising, then, that Coach very often asks the other characters to clarify their words. For instance, in S1E18, after Carla rejoices at the idea that she is, at long last, able to take part in the Miss Boston Barmaids Contest in spite of her being pregnant ("Finally, they're letting in preggos!"), Sam sets her straight: "No, Carla, it's not you. It's Diane." Yet Sam's answer proves to be ambiguous for Coach, who very earnestly asks: "Sam, Diane's pregnant?" In S2E2, Coach misunderstands Sam's "Coach, we were gonna kiss" by answering "We were?", when it is clear for anybody in the bar and the audience that the deictic "we" referred to Sam and Diane. Similarly, in S2E3, after Norm explains that Vera and him went to the same school ("Didn't I tell you? We were in school together."), Coach asks: "We were?", again misinterpreting Norm's "we". In S2E19, Coach mistakenly thinks that when his friend Artie talks about "the shocking news about T-Bone," he is talking not about T-Bone's passing, but about his trying to seduce his wife quite some time ago: "You mean you knew about it?" Coach's frequent questions reveal that he often needs additional information to make sense of his interlocutors' utterances (compared to the other characters of *Cheers*), and that he does not give up on what writer and producer Glen Charles grandiloquently called his "striving to make sense out of life [32]", or less grandiloquently, I would say, to make sense of his interlocutors.

Clearly, Coach's cognitive efforts are not as efficient as his interlocutors' cognitive efforts and/or his sense of what is relevant is dissimilar to what his interlocutors think is relevant; this explains why Coach interprets his interlocutors' utterances differently from the way they interpret utterances. As already mentioned, Wilson and Sperber argue that the relevance theoretic comprehension procedure entails "Follow[ing] a path of least effort in computing cognitive effects" and "Stop[ping] when your expectations of relevance are satisfied [33]"; they specify that there are quite a number of subtasks involved in the overall comprehension process, namely disambiguation, reference resolution and lexical narrowing [34]. Coach's capacity to construct hypotheses about the explicit content of the utterances he processes, and namely his capacity to assign reference, is understandably influenced by his cognitive difficulties. And one of his recurring problems concerns indeed what Langacker calls "the ability to mentally adopt (or least perceive and accommodate) the vantage point of [one's]

[32] See Tom Shales's article, 1985.
[33] Wilson, Deirdre and Sperber, Dan, 2004, p. 613.
[34] Wilson, Deirdre and Sperber, Dan, 2004, p. 615.

interlocutor [35]"—which makes it possible for speakers to understand, among other things, how other speakers assign reference to pronouns or deictics. As Langacker puts it [36], typically, the referents of *I* and singular *you* are "uniquely determined in the context of a given speech event" and the referents of the plurals *we* and *you* are, similarly, "normally quite apparent." The assignment of reference is different for third person pronouns however, since "the absence of descriptions [such as relative clauses or modifiers] has the consequence that the set of candidates for reference is always open-ended [37]". Third person pronouns imply unique identification without "provid[ing] the means to achieve it [38]"—though such pronouns presuppose that the hearer can identify their referents thanks to salient linguistic or extralinguistic information. Coach, nevertheless, seems to miss what his interlocutors consider to be salient and ostensively relevant, thus frequently assigning what his interlocutors consider to be astonishing referents to deictics and pronouns.

Even though, as Langacker implies, it seems very unlikely (to say the least) that interlocutors disagree on the referent of "you" in a conversation, in S3E12, Coach and Sam do not interpret "you" in the same way when Sam decides to take over serving an attractive female customer Coach was tending to.

> Sam: "Coach, I'll handle this one."
> Coach [Giving the bottle of white wine to Sam]: "Here you go."
> [Wiping the counter.]
> Sam: "I hope this doesn't embarrass you too much, but you have the most beautiful eyes that I have ever seen."
> Coach: "I kinda get flustered, but it's nice to hear."

While the audience obviously understands that when Sam is talking, a second later, about his interlocutor's "beautiful eyes," he is flirting with the young lady and not paying a compliment to his bartender, Coach does not understand Sam's utterance in the same way. Indeed, the vocative "Coach" undeniably shows that Sam is addressing his bartender when he says: "I'll handle this one," and Coach is then so busy wiping the counter that he does not see that Sam is no longer looking at him, but at the female customer. Yet non faulty inferential capacities would have helped Coach realize that, if Sam wanted to serve this young lady, it was because he wished to get a chance to talk to her—which the audience, no doubt, understands straightaway. S1E1 offers a similar example when Coach fails to understand a derivative of "you," the possessive "your," in the same way as everybody else in the bar (or in the audience). However, this time, it is not because he is not really the addressee, but because he

[35] Langacker, Ronald, 1987, p. 141.
[36] Langacker, Ronald, 2007, p. 176.
[37] Langacker, Ronald, 2007, p. 177.
[38] Langacker, Ronald, 2007, p. 177

fails to see that he is asked a question in his capacity as a bartender working at Cheers and thus familiar with the premises, and not as Ernie Pantusso who lives in an apartment in Boston, which he is the only one to know. When Diane (who, at that point, is not yet a waitress at Cheers, but a customer sitting at the counter waiting for her fiancé) asks: "Excuse me, where is your bathroom?", Coach ingenuously replies: "Next to my bedroom." Only after Sam says: "Down the hall." does Coach get what Diane really wanted to know (where the bathroom is in the bar—and not in Coach's apartment) and, accordingly, lets out an "Oh."

As mentioned above, the referents of the plurals *you* and *we* are usually, just like the singular *you*, easily identified. However, Coach sometimes does not understand in the same way as his interlocutors who is included or not included alongside the speaker in the group designated by the personal pronoun *we*. This is the case in previously cited examples from S2E2 and S2E3:

> Sam: "Coach, we were gonna kiss."
> Coach: "We were? Do you mind if I do these first, Sam?" (S2E2)
>
> Coach: "By the way, Normie, how did you and Vera meet anyway?"
> Norm: "Didn't I tell you? We were in school together."
> Coach: "We were?"
> Norm: "Not you and I. Vera and I."
> Coach: "Oh, good." (S2E3)

In S2E2, efficiently working memory and/or inferential capacities could have helped Coach assign the correct reference to the "we" in "we were gonna kiss." Either Coach is temporarily unable to retrieve the information that Sam and Diane are seeing each other that is stored in his long-term memory, or he is unable to infer from that piece of information that "we" refers to them. Moreover, Coach is busy writing something down and consequently does not get the sensory input that would have helped him assign the correct reference to "we," that is to say Sam's gesturing towards Diane and himself (to signify to Coach that he intruded on a moment of intimacy). Thus, he (not illogically) interprets the vocative "Coach" at the beginning of Sam's utterance as the sign that he is included in the group that "we" refers to. Similarly, in S2E3, despite the fact that Coach himself asked a question about Norm and his wife, he is unable to correctly interpret Norm's "we." Because of his short attention span, he does not see the connection between what he asked and Norm's answer. He therefore believes that when Norm said "We were in school together," he was referring to himself, and his current interlocutor, that is to say Coach.

Since Coach is regularly unable to assign the proper reference to *you*, or *we*, it is no surprise that he makes frequent mistakes concerning third person personal pronouns [39], the referents of which require a greater cognitive load to identify, according to Langacker [40]. Impersonal *it* [41], in particular, can be hard to process since, as Bolinger puts it [42], it is "a 'definite' nominal with almost the greatest possible generality of meaning, limited only in the sense that it is 'neuter' […]. It embraces weather, time, circumstance, whatever is obvious by the nature of reality or the implications of context". As Langacker insists, contrary to what some formalist and generativist linguists argue, impersonal *it* is not just a "dummy it," whose mere function is to make sentences grammatical; impersonal *it* does not lack meaning, but on the contrary refers to something, and that "something" is often vague and general [43]—a vagueness which is "very common and clearly useful [44]"—a vagueness which native speakers are familiar with and used to making sense of, thanks to the contextual information they have. Coach nonetheless often displays difficulties to process *it* and its inherent vagueness. In S1E8, Diane asks Coach for some advice:

> Diane: "I reached out to her. That weasel! Coach, what do you do when you are so furious you have to do something?"
> Coach: "Well, I know you'll think it is kind of crazy, but I bang my head on the bar."
> Diane: "Doesn't sound crazy to me. It might do me a lot of good right now."
> Coach: "Well, ok!" [Starts banging his head on the bar.]
> Diane: "Oh no, Coach, stop that, please!"
> Coach: "You feel better?"
> Diane: "Yes, thank you. How about you?"

There is no exact textual antecedent for Diane's "it" in "It might do me a lot of good right now." Although it is rather obvious for the audience that Diane's "it" means something like "banging my head on the bar" or "hurting myself" or something similar (with "my" or "myself" referring to Diane), Coach does not reach that conclusion. He does not infer from Diane's feelings towards Carla, which she expressed very openly ("That weasel!"), that she is

[39] The case of "him" has already been mentioned above: in S1E14, Coach thinks Diane is asking a question about his grandfather when she was actually talking about his dog; in S1E5, Coach is unable to understand that, when Sam reminds him of his famous words of encouragement "Go get him!", he is no longer referring to Charlie Spikes, but to his daughter's boorish fiancé.
[40] See Langacker, Ronald, 2007.
[41] Ronald Langacker, 2007, p. 179 re-asserts that personal pronouns can have impersonal uses, when they do not refer to any specific individuals or sets of individuals—the term "personal pronoun" can seem improper but is actually quite appropriate since "the impersonal pronouns of English display essentially the same meanings they have in personal uses".
[42] Bolinger, Dwight, 1977, p. 84-85.
[43] "It (i.e. *it*) is impersonal simply by being construed with maximal vagueness and non-delimitation" (2007, 180).
[44] Langacker, Ronald, 2007, p. 180.

looking for something *she* could do to alleviate her anger. Another instance of Coach's having a hard time understanding Diane's use of impersonal *it* occurs in S3E2:

> Coach: "Diane, listen. Diane, please! I have something to say and it's straight from here."
> Diane: "What is it, Coach?"
> Coach: "This is my heart, isn't it?"
> Diane: "Yes, it is."

While Diane's question is an invitation for Coach to proceed, Coach thinks that she is wondering what his "here" is referring to, what part of his body he is pointing at. In other words, he is interpreting her impersonal *it* as if it were a personal *it*, the referent of which he thinks is his heart.

As all these examples show, Coach's cognitive difficulties impact his implementation of the principles of relevance theory. While, like any speaker, he is trying to make the smallest efforts possible to reach the largest contextual effects possible, his efforts are not really crowned with success in the eyes of non-cognitively impaired individuals, resulting in what could be called interlocutive distortions such as the ones analyzed in the last section. However, it cannot be denied that Coach is trying to maximize cognitive efficiency; that is to say to strike the best balance between his efforts and the desired effects. He cannot, however, strain his cognitive system more than he does, as his already frequent headaches or blackouts testify, but is more than willing to process the input he is given. Consequently, he cannot interpret his interlocutors' utterances as non-cognitively impaired individuals would expect him to, and numerous humorous exchanges result from these communicative twists. Obviously, since *Cheers* is a sitcom, and since there are amusingly strange diegetic explanations for Coach's cognitive troubles, no one (in the bar or in the audience) feels worried about him. His reactions and the discursive consequences of his misinterpretations of his interlocutors' utterances are part and parcel of the humor of the first three seasons of this sitcom. *Cheers*'s formula [45], in effect, plays on various types and sources of humor: namely, Diane's wit, Carla's sarcasm, Norm's one-liners, Cliff's ridiculous know-it-all attitude and Coach's cognitive misfires [46] and their repercussions on the exchanges with his interlocutor(s).

[45] For Jean-Pierre Esquenazi, 2014, studying a TV series requires identifying the "formula" at work, which does not define a specific storyline, or a set of specific characters, or a specific setting, but makes it possible to come up with various storylines, characters, settings (91). A formula therefore delimits the narration, the diegetic world and the style of the series (95).
[46] On occasion, Coach embodies the Renaissance fool though, like in S2E18, when he replies: "Don't we all?" to Sam's: "I got a funeral waiting for me."

Coach's cognitive distortions do not, contrary to what may have been expected, reveal that the principles of relevance theory should be questioned for cognitively impaired individuals. Coach does implement these principles, but his faulty computing of his cognitive environment lead him to hilariously—for his interlocutors and the audience—respond to his interlocutors. Part of the humor of the first three seasons of *Cheers* comes from the gap between Coach's expectations of relevance and everybody else's expectations of relevance. What this ultimately suggests, then, is that the surprising reactions of cognitively impaired individuals result as much from them as from their interlocutors. While the former have a hard time processing their cognitive environment and derive unanticipated conclusions, the latter are, most of the time, unable to supply premises adapted to these hearers [47]. So if there are distortions of the principles of relevance theory, they also derive from non-cognitively impaired speakers' inability to make their assumptions manifest and relevant enough for this type of interlocutors—re-affirming once again, if it were necessary, how communication is indeed a two-place relation.

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[47] It should be noted nonetheless that Coach's interlocutors sometimes provide additional information after Coach's faulty interpretations of their utterances for him to better understand what they meant. For instance, in S2E19, Sam elucidates the reference of the pronoun "it," making it clear that it was T-Bone's death that was mentioned in the papers, not his attempt to entice Coach's wife. In S3E6, Cliff humorously says: "I think I know somebody who's in love" but Coach does not understand he was talking about him, and so he clarifies: "Coach, Coach, I meant you." In S3E22, Diane asks Coach to (metaphorically) stand by Sam; when Coach leaves to literally stand by him, Diane corrects herself and says: "No, no, Coach, come back. Instead of standing by him, why don't you just sort of . . . watch over him?"

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