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X-phemistic multimodal metaphors and the creation of humour in *How I Met your Mother*

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the links between multimodal and non-verbal metaphors (and other tropes), X-phemisms (all the words which refer to taboo topics, from euphemisms to dysphemisms, as defined by Allan/Burridge 1991, 2006), and the creation of humour in the sitcom *How I Met your Mother* (2005-2013, CBS). I mostly focus on creative metaphors relying on at least two modes among the verbal mode (non-written language), the visual mode (moving images), and music/non-verbal sounds. All the metaphors mentioned in the paper are related to taboo topics (bodily fluids, disease, or sex) and they are all used as alternative means to refer to those taboo topics. I explain how these X-phemistic multimodal metaphors participate in the creation of humour in the sitcom. I mostly rely on the incongruity approach to humour to explain that the use of different modes contributes to the creation of a form of inconsistency that leads to humour.

In diesem Beitrag geht es um die Verbindungen zwischen multimodalen und nonverbalen Metaphern (und anderen Tropen), X-Phemismen (alle Wörter, die sich auf Tabuthemen beziehen, von Euphemismen bis hin zu Dysphemismen, wie sie von Allan/Burridge 1991, 2006 definiert wurden) und die Schaffung von Humor in der Sitcom *How I Met your Mother* (2005-2013, CBS). Ich konzentriere mich hauptsächlich auf kreative Metaphern, die sich auf mindestens zwei Modi stützen: den verbalen Modus (nicht geschriebene Sprache), den visuellen Modus (bewegte Bilder) und Musik/nonverbale Klänge. Alle in diesem Beitrag erwähnten Metaphern beziehen sich auf Tabuthemen (Körperflüssigkeiten, Krankheiten oder Sex) und werden als alternative Mittel verwendet, um auf diese Tabuthemen hinzuweisen. Ich erkläre, wie diese X-phemistischen multimodalen Metaphern zur Schaffung von Humor in der Sitcom beitragen. Ich stütze mich vor allem auf den Inkongruenzansatz für Humor, um zu erklären, dass die Verwendung verschiedener Modi zur Schaffung einer Form von Inkonsistenz beiträgt, die zu Humor führt.

1. Introduction¹

How I Met your Mother (2005-2013, CBS) is an American sitcom that has been praised for its linguistic creativity (Sams 2016; Bordet 2021; Terry 2021), and in a previous study (Terry 2019), I analysed the verbal metaphors used to mention taboo topics. This paper focuses on multimodal and non-verbal metaphors in the TV series, and more specifically on occurrences relying on at least two modes among spoken language, written language, the visual mode (moving

¹ I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions which have helped me to considerably improve this paper. Any errors that might remain are mine.

images), music and non-verbal sounds. All the metaphors mentioned in this paper are related to taboo topics and they are all used as alternative means to mention, to represent and/or to avoid those taboo topics; in other words, they can be interpreted as X-phemisms (all the words or phrases which refer to taboo topics, from euphemisms to dysphemisms, see Allan/Burridge 1991, 2006). They also all participate in the creation of humour, and I will try to explain the role that multimodality plays in the humorous process in these X-phemistic metaphors in *HIMYM*. As Dynel (2009b: 1) argues, “a precise description of humour processes entails an anti-essentialist approach”. Therefore, the aim of this paper is not to propose a new framework but to analyse a few independent occurrences of humorous multimodal tropes and to show how they individually participate in the creation of humour in the sitcom.

In the first part, I define the concepts that are used in the paper and expose the theoretical background; the second part is dedicated to the analysis of a few excerpts that were manually chosen in the corpus.

2. Definition of the concepts and theoretical background

2.1 Conceptual metaphor and multimodality

Conceptual Metaphor Theory has opened the path for the development of a new and revised approach to metaphor studies. Since 1980, new models explaining the conventional or creative nature of metaphors have emerged. The classification I will rely on was established by Crespo Fernández (2008: 98), who distinguishes between lexicalised metaphors (lexicalised metaphorical expressions that derive from a broadly used conceptual metaphor), semi-lexicalised metaphors (creative metaphorical expressions that derive from a broadly used conceptual metaphor), and creative metaphors (creative metaphorical expressions that derive from a new conceptual metaphor). These distinctions between ‘creative’ and ‘primary’ conceptual metaphors can also be applied to metaphors in film (Forceville 2016: 24) and to metaphors in TV series.

Indeed, Coëgnarts/Kravanja (2012: 97) also argue that the model proposed by cognitive linguistics and the Conceptual Metaphor Theory can be applied to non-verbal modes:

If this belief, put forward by the cognitive metaphor theory (CMT), is correct and metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and not

language, then it is plausible to assume, as Forceville (2009) rightly does, that there exist other manifestations of conceptual metaphor. Indeed, if conceptual metaphor is not restricted to the realm of language alone, it should manifest itself also through other (non-verbal) modes of communication, such as pictures, music, sound and body language.

Forceville (2009: 4) defines multimodal metaphors as “metaphors whose target and source are rendered exclusively or predominantly in two different modes/modalities [...] – and in many cases the verbal is one of these”. The different modes are listed in Forceville (2016: 20):

For practical purposes I stick to the following, somewhat idiosyncratic, list of modes: (1) visuals; (2) spoken language; (3) written language; (4) sound; (5) music; (6) gestures; (7) touch; (8) smell; (9) olfaction (see Forceville 2006a for more discussion). If we ignore cinema experiments involving (7)-(9), film can draw on modes (1)-(6).

In this paper, I focus on metaphors relying on a combination of spoken language (2) on the one hand, and the visual mode (1) (more specifically, moving images), music (5), non-verbal sounds (4), and written language (3) on the other hand. Nevertheless, metaphor is not the only trope mentioned in this paper; interestingly, Coëgnarts/Kravanja (2012: 102) point out that visual metaphors often partly rely on metonymy – more precisely, that the target domain is often rendered metonymically:

Language (spoken or written signs) is, by virtue of its symbolic and arbitrary nature, the only mode being capable of rendering the abstract and generic quality of the target domain. Consequently, the target domain of a structural-conceptual metaphor, if present, is usually depicted indirectly or connotatively by means of a metonymy.

The interaction between metaphor and metonymy in the verbal mode is referred to as *metaphonymy*, a term coined by Goossens (1995); it can be extended to visual metaphors and arguably to any metaphor that is rendered partly or wholly in one or several non-verbal modes. Following Coëgnarts (2019: 303), I will endeavour to show “how stylistically motivated [creative metaphors]² may be mapped onto the inferential logic of metonymically represented target domains”.

² “image schemas” in Coëgnarts (2019: 303).

Coëgnarts (2019: 308) also argues that in movies – and by extension, in TV series and sitcoms –, which focus on human beings, the body is quite often resorted to in the construal of metonymies – and by extension, of metaphonymies:

Because narrative cinema is essentially human-centered, relying heavily on the actions of fictional characters, it can be assumed that meaning in film operates significantly through the bodily features and actions of the actors and actresses on-screen. In specifying the role of the human body in the construal of metonymies, cognitive linguists have repeatedly attributed significance to body parts and physiological and expressive responses.

A common example is THE FACIAL EXPRESSIONS FOR EMOTION metonymy (Kövecses 2000: 134), also analysed in films by Coëgnarts (2019: 308).

It should be specified that metaphors are the most productive means of semantic creation, and all the more so when it comes to creating new X-phemisms to mention taboo topics. Moreover, metaphonymies, and more generally speaking, the interactions between metaphor and metonymy, have an impact on the X-phemistic nature of metaphors (Terry 2020).

2.2 Taboos, X-phemisms and metaphors

The occurrences I analyse in the second part of this paper are all related to taboo topics; this choice was made because taboo topics are often spoken of or represented metaphorically or humorously. Social taboos are “a proscription of behaviour that affects everyday life” and that people tend to avoid “unless they intend to violate a taboo” (Allan/Burridge 2006: 1). Calvo (2005: 65) extends this definition of the social taboo to the linguistic taboo:

Linguistically speaking, the term taboo is extended to all those words or sets of words referring to objects, concepts or actions that a given society considers to be individually or collectively subject to proscription. As a consequence, ineffability is cast upon them.

In other words, a taboo domain is a conceptual domain that cannot be mentioned freely with anyone. The four domains that are almost systematically included in that category are sex, disease, death and bodily fluids (Allan/Burridge 1991, 2006; Gatambuki 2011); some linguists (Enright 1985; Keyes 2010) add politics, money, drugs, race, religion or food to this list. Speakers tend to resort to euphemisms – or more accurately, X-phemisms – to mention these topics.

X-phemisms are defined as “the union set of [...] ‘phemisms’” (Burridge 2012: 66), that is to say all the terms that can be found on the continuum between euphemisms (“the semantic or formal process by which the taboo is stripped of its most explicit or obscene overtones”, Crespo Fernández 2008: 96) and their negative counterparts, dysphemisms (“the process whereby the most pejorative traits of the taboo are highlighted with an offensive aim to the addressee or to the concept itself”, Crespo Fernández 2008: 96). Allan/Burridge (2006) notice that in many occurrences, there is a discrepancy between the locution and the illocutionary point of the utterance and therefore coined two new terms to designate these: *dysphemistic euphemism* and *euphemistic dysphemism*. In dysphemistic euphemisms, which are dysphemistic locutions in which the illocutionary point is euphemistic, the speaker uses a dysphemistic term without an intention to be offensive and without actually offending the co-speaker. On the other hand, euphemistic dysphemisms are euphemistic locutions in which the illocutionary point is dysphemistic, which means that the speaker uses a euphemistic term with no intention of sparing the co-speaker. Because of this discrepancy between the locution and the illocutionary point of the utterance, dysphemistic euphemisms and euphemistic dysphemisms often endorse a humorous function in discourse.

Definitions of X-phemisms tend to be restricted to two modes: written and spoken language. However, the concept of X-phemisms can also be applied to other modes besides these two as taboos are not merely linguistic. The most striking example is arguably the visual mode, in which many symbols can euphemistically refer to a taboo topic or object, for example a raven, a candle, or the colour black for death.

Finally, the reason why metaphors are a particularly productive tool in the creation of new X-phemisms to mention taboo topics (Crespo Fernández 2006) is that they resort to the process of highlighting-hiding (Kövecses 2002: 80):

When a metaphor focuses on one or some aspects of a target concept, we can say that it highlights that or those aspect(s).

Highlighting necessarily goes together with hiding. This means that when a concept has several aspects (which is normally the case) and the metaphor focuses on one (or maybe two or three) aspect(s), the other aspects of the concept will remain hidden, that is, out of focus. Highlighting and hiding presuppose each other.

Depending on the source domain that is resorted to and the correspondences that are established between the two domains, the metaphor can tend towards a more euphemistic or a more dysphemistic interpretation. In other words, metaphors allow speakers to preserve or violate the taboo by hiding or highlighting its most offensive traits. This process of highlighting and hiding in metaphors can also contribute to a humorous interpretation of X-phemisms.

2.3 Metaphor and humour

Humour is generally explained by one of the following three main theories: superiority, incongruity, and relief. Following Dynel (2013: 1), the approach that will be adopted here is the incongruity approach, as it tends to prevail in linguistic studies “because it accounts for the cognitive and pragmatic processes underpinning the understanding of humorous texts”. Incongruity requires the presence of two elements that conflict with each other, for example because they are not usually associated and because their association is a source of surprise. As defined in the model established by Suls (1972), “humorous incongruity entails unexpectedness, illogicality and ultimate resolution” (Dynel 2009a: 28). However, it has also been argued that “incongruity must never be removed entirely at the resolution stage”, as it would “disallow the appreciation of two competitive meanings” (Dynel 2009a: 29).

Naturally, incongruity does not always lead to humour; there needs to be some kind of “facilitating context” or “playful frame of mind” (Dynel 2009a: 28). McGraw/Warren (2010: 1142) agree that a humorous interpretation is favoured when the situation is “perceived to be safe, playful, nonserious, or, in other words, benign” and further suggest that it is also more likely to occur when there is a “breach of norms” or “taboo content”. McGraw/Williams/Warren (2013: 567) found that psychological distance³ plays a crucial role, be it “temporal (now vs. then), spatial (here vs. there), social (self vs. other), [or] hypothetical (real vs. imagined)”.

³ McGraw/Williams/Warren (2013: 567) argue that “psychological distance can play a critical role in shaping humorous responses to tragedy”, but this statement can be applied to humorous responses in general.

Incongruity theory seems to be particularly relevant for the study of humorous X-phemistic metaphors because as pointed out by Dynel (2013: vii), it accounts for:

- “the *cognitive* [...] processes underpinning the understanding of humour [my italics, A.T.]”, but also for the cognitive processes underpinning the understanding of metaphors (as resorting to a metaphor implies processing the correspondences between a source domain and a target domain that seem irreconcilable at first);
- “[the] *pragmatic* processes underpinning the understanding of humour [my italics, A.T.]”, but also for the pragmatic processes underpinning the understanding of X-phemisms (as resorting to an X-phemism implies choosing a term on the paradigmatic axis to mention a topic that should not be mentioned in the first place because it is tabooed; X-phemisms become humorous when they are incongruous in a given situation).

Incongruity is present in metaphor in various degrees because of the different natures of the source and the target domains, even if metaphorisation creates analogies between them, as argued by Dynel (2009b: 31):

The central humorous capacity [of metaphors] resides, however, in the incongruity between the topic and the vehicle and their attributes, which are, nevertheless, somehow compatible (congruous), even if this may be difficult to observe initially.

The various reasons why incongruity in metaphors can lead to a humorous interpretation are thoroughly detailed in Dynel (2009a): diaphoricity, incongruity between the domains/concepts, unprototypical vehicles, unavailability of the ground, multiple interpretations and ‘wrong’ prioritisation of features, exhaustive attribution of the features, or humorous incongruity within the vignette of the vehicle.

This entails that metaphors are only interpreted as humorous in specific contexts, even though they always rely on two domains that are, to a certain extent, incongruous. Two elements that seem to strongly contribute to guiding the viewers to a humorous interpretation are creativity and the presence of an inappropriate source or target domain. Indeed, creative metaphors tend to be more humorous because they rely on an incongruous association of a source domain and a target domain, which is not the case of lexicalised metaphors (Dynel 2009a), or when the correspondences between the source and the target

domains are unusual or incongruous (Terry 2019). Dynel (2009a: 30–35) argues that humorous metaphors also often rely on taboo or inappropriate source domains, and the nature of the target domain may also play a significant part (Terry 2019). I will try to show that under certain conditions, the choice to resort to different modes might also contribute to the creation of a form of inconsistency, incongruity or absurdity that participates in the humorous process.

Finally, Forceville (2016: 22) claims that visual metaphors (and I would argue all metaphors) are particularly salient when the source domain is non-diegetic (i.e. not part of the story) and that metaphors with non-diegetic source domains even tend to be ‘obtrusive’. Non-diegetic source domains are indeed particularly salient – because they highlight some characteristics of the taboo – and as a consequence, if this source domain is used to hide a taboo reference, viewers “must go past the absurd foregrounded euphemisms to understand the backgrounded dysphemisms that lie underneath” (Veale 2008: 73) and resolve the incongruity. In the occurrences analysed in part 2, however, the resolution is rather effortless for the viewers because the metaphors rely on several modes.

3. Analysis of a few occurrences of multimodal metaphors in *How I Met your Mother*

3.1 Presentation of the corpus

How I Met your Mother (CBS, 2005-2014, henceforth *HIMYM*) is an American sitcom composed of 9 seasons and 208 twenty-minute episodes in which a character-narrator, Future Ted, retrospectively tells his two children the story of how he met their mother. Studies have been conducted on *HIMYM* as regards its linguistic creativity (Sams 2016; Terry 2019, 2021b) and its narrative creativity (Cornillon 2006; Favard 2014; Terry 2021a), but it seems that no attention has been paid to multimodal tropes in the TV series. It has been highlighted that Future Ted is a very unreliable narrator: he constantly distorts the truth for different reasons, supposedly because he cannot remember the unfolding of events properly or because he seeks to hide details from his children, ultimately to confuse the viewers and to create humour.

The occurrences analysed in this part are five representative examples that were selected from the corpus through a thorough viewing of the episodes. The occurrences had to be instances of multimodal tropes related to taboo topics,

and a minimum of one occurrence was selected for the combination of the verbal mode (spoken language) and at least one of the following: the visual mode, written language, music and sound.

3.2 Combination of the verbal mode and the visual mode (HIMYM 8x13)

The first occurrence is a combination of the verbal mode and the visual mode (HIMYM 8x13). The metaphor is firstly established *in praesentia*, predominantly in the verbal mode in this excerpt:

- (1) FUTURE TED (narrator): Kids, in late 2012, I received a very important text message. Uncle Barney and Aunt Robin were engaged, marking a truly happy time for our little group. The problem was one of us was definitely not happy. (*crying*)
LILY: Marvin will not stop crying.
TED: What do you guys think it is? Is he hungry?
LILY: Well, that must be it. Huh! Thank you for thinking of that, Ted. And here we were just watering him and facing him towards the sunlight. Sorry, I haven't slept in... January.
MARSHALL: Food going in isn't the problem, it's *what's coming out*, or not coming out. He hasn't *pooped* in three days.
LILY: Yeah, normally I wouldn't wish one of his *dirty diapers* on my worst enemy, but now I kind of miss popping the hood in the morning and finding *that first big juicy, black...*
MARSHALL: Lily, I'm eating chili. I'm eating chili, Lily.
LILY: *Confetti. Big blast of confetti.* Normally, the kid's *a confetti machine*. He's *Rip Taylor in a diaper*.
MARSHALL: I have a feeling at this point, Rip Taylor is Rip Taylor in a diaper. And with that image, dinner is done.
[...]

In this occurrence, the target domain is FAECES while the source domain is CONFETTI, an unusual association. Faeces, like all bodily effluvia, are tabooed; they are often thought of as repulsive, as pointed out by Allan/Burridge (1991: 52): "Intuitively we seem to find nearly all the bodily effluvia of anyone, especially any nonintimate, revolting to all our senses." Therefore, it tends to be mentioned euphemistically. The metaphor does not occur right away in the conversation as *poop* is firstly used as an orthophemism for children's faeces used among a group of friends; when it does, the source domain (CONFETTI) is firstly used because the target domain (FAECES) visually resembles the dish that

Marshall is eating (“I’m eating chili, Lily”). Thanks to the metaphor, Lily strips the taboo from its negative overtones and hides the visual aspect of faeces to protect Marshall’s negative face and to avoid the verbal dysphemism (“that first big juicy, black...”). Later in the episode, as Marshall is changing baby Marvin, the same metaphor is re-used in a different mode:



Fig. 1: FAECES conceptualised as CONFETTI (HIMYM 8x13)

- (2) MARSHALL: All right, let’s see *what’s in this dipey*. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Hey. Are you finally giving Daddy a smile? Oh! Oh, God!
(*Confetti*)
FUTURE TED (narrator): *And, no, it wasn't confetti.*
MARSHALL: Oh! Oh, God! Please’
LILY: *Holy confetti.*

The visual metaphor is a means to avoid the visual dysphemism that would be utterly disgusting to the viewers, whose negative face is thereby protected. Euphemisation is efficient as the correspondences are difficult to retrieve – so difficult to retrieve that we might wonder if this is indeed a metaphor in which one domain is construed in terms of another or a simple substitution; among the possible correlations that could be established between the two domains is the difficulty to clean up. Nevertheless, if the purely verbal occurrence (1) might very well be a simple substitution (a very positive one), the multimodal occurrence (2) is both metaphorical and metonymical, in addition to avoiding

the use of an offensive image. Firstly, it can be argued that it is metaphorical as confetti evoke a celebration – in this case, the event that is much anticipated by the parents, Marvin’s bowel movement. Secondly, in the visual mode, the source domain is represented by confetti and the target tabooed domain is represented metonymically through a superimposition of the image-schema EFFECT FOR CAUSE (Marshall’s disgust for Marvin’s action), and FACIAL EXPRESSION FOR EMOTION (Marshall’s face for Marshall’s disgust). The metaphonymy is represented in figure 2.

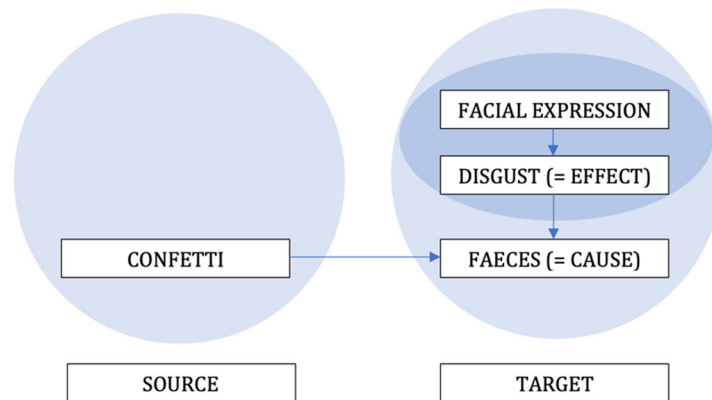


Fig. 2: Conceptual metaphonymy: Faeces conceptualised as confetti

One factor that may explain the humorousness of the metaphonymy is its creativity: the two domains are not usually associated, so there is a strong discrepancy between them and it leads to a form of incongruity – even absurdity – that is extremely salient for the viewers, although easily resolvable. Indeed, they do not need Future Ted’s clarification (“and no, it wasn’t confetti”) to understand the metaphonymy, all the more so as the correspondences were explained earlier in the episode in the verbal mode (1). However, the humorous potential of the metaphonymy increases in (2) because the visual representation of the confetti is much more unexpected than the incongruous association of two distant domains. Although resolvable, incongruity cannot be completely evacuated. The viewers are conscious of the fact that contrary to what occurred in (1), the substitution only occurs at the level of the viewers, not at the level of the characters. Since there is no threat made to the viewer’s face, the metaphonymy can be interpreted as humorous.

Finally, *holy confetti* is a pun based on the distortion of the dysphemistic set phrase *holy crap/shit*, which are swear words based on blasphemy (with the use of *holy* coupled with the use of dysphemistic *crap* or *shit*). However, *holy confetti*

is a euphemistic dysphemism: the locution/image itself is rather euphemistic but the illocutionary force is dysphemistic (Allan/Burridge 2006: 39) as the very act of swearing and the blasphemy confer a dysphemistic dimension to the utterance. Nevertheless, neither the other characters nor the viewers are shocked by the utterance, which can be interpreted as humorous as well, because they understand the reference. *Confetti* undergoes the same process as dysphemistic *crap* and *shit*; it becomes contaminated by the taboo and acquires the potential to become a swear word in context.

3.3 Combination of the verbal mode, the sound mode and the visual mode (*HIMYM 6x24*)

The second occurrence is a linguistic realisation of the conceptual metaphor A PERSON IS AN ANIMAL in which a sick person is conceptualised as a dinosaur (*HIMYM 6x24*). It also draws on the taboo domain DISEASE and is a combination of the verbal mode and sounds. DISEASE is a particularly dysphemistic domain because it is at the crossroads of three taboo conceptual domains: the most tabooed diseases are those which are or might be fatal, such as cancer, because they are very close to the domain of DEATH; sexually transmitted infections are also very tabooed because they are linked to the domain of SEX; and finally, those diseases which are neither fatal nor sexually transmitted are usually tabooed because of the close links they have to bodily fluids, such as gastroenteritis or food poisoning. In *HIMYM 6x24*, Lily believes she got food poisoning from eating soup and wants to prevent Marshall (her husband) from eating the leftovers, but she is unsuccessful because Marshall has already eaten his third bowl by the time she gets to the apartment:

- (3) MARSHALL (*off-voice, trying to comfort Lily without being disgusted*): But when Lily gets going, she sounds *like a velociraptor from Jurassic Park*. (*Lily starts vomiting over the toilet bowl, growling like a velociraptor*) But then I realized... a man can do a lot of living in three hours.

[...]

BARNEY: I wonder *what end it's coming out of Lily right now*.

ROBIN: I bet it's her tushie.

BARNEY: I bet it's both. (*gestures and makes sounds, mimicking someone exploding*).

[...]

LILY: (*velociraptor growls, vomiting in a bucket*)

MARSHALL: I know it's risky to go, but this is the best environmental law firm in New York, my dream job.

LILY: (*velociraptor sounds, vomiting in a bucket*)

MARSHALL: It's a great idea babe, I'll ask them.

[...]

LILY: I couldn't hear it 'cause I was in the bathroom... *blowing my nose. I have the sniffles.*

TED (*on the answering machine*): Hey, Lily, hope you're feeling better. Marshall told us *you're exploding from both ends like a busted fire hydrant.*

LILY: Damn it, Marshall. (*runs to the bathroom; we can hear velociraptor growls*). *Atchou!*

The correspondences that are established between the two domains can be retrieved. Although the correlation between vomiting sounds and growling is the most salient, other correspondences are being projected, although not as easily: the sick person is disgusting while the velociraptor is repulsive, a sick person can be contagious while a velociraptor is dangerous, etc. There is a superimposition of three different modes:

- the verbal mode (both the source and the target); "food poisoning" belongs to the target domain, while "a velociraptor from Jurassic Park" belongs to the source domain; note that the presence of "sounds like" points to the fact that the occurrence is actually a metaphorical comparison, and not a metaphor; in the excerpts in (3), the target domain is always referred to figuratively in the mode of spoken language.
- the visual mode (the target domain); Lily vomiting over the toilets or in the bucket is a visual representation of the target domain PERSON;
- the sound mode (the source domain); velociraptor sounds are a sound representation of the target domain ANIMAL, and more specifically here, of a velociraptor.

The occurrence can be analysed as a dysphemistic euphemism: the sound itself is rather dysphemistic but the illocutionary force is not dysphemistic because the aim is not to sicken the viewers, but rather to generate humour. Three elements can help us account for the dysphemistic nature of the occurrence: firstly, there is a hyperbolisation of the sound, which reinforces the dysphemistic traits; on the contrary, euphemisms seek to minimise and soften the most repulsive traits of the taboo. Hyperbolisation seems to be the main motivation in this occurrence, as it aims at representing Marshall's exacerbated repugnance.

The velociraptor sounds stand for what he pretends to perceive when telling the story; they only appear after he declares “she sounds like a velociraptor from Jurassic Park”. Secondly, there is a synecdochic relationship (PART-FOR-WHOLE = sound of a person vomiting for a person being sick). Synecdoches tend to be resorted to in order to create dysphemisms rather than euphemisms (Allan/Burridge 1991, 2006; Terry 2019). Thirdly, Marshall displays an overly exaggerated repulsed face (and so do Barney and Robin later on), which represents the feeling of disgust and vicarious nausea that one may feel when faced with such a situation; this is another realisation of the FACIAL EXPRESSIONS FOR EMOTION metonymy (Kövecses 2000: 134), mentioned by Coëgnarts (2019: 308).

Humour emerges in this semi-lexicalised metaphor because the association of a sick person and a velociraptor is novel, even if the broader conceptual metaphor it stems from, A PERSON IS AN ANIMAL, is not, but it also rises from the discrepancy between two modes since the metaphor is not particularly humorous until the viewers actually hear the velociraptor sound, which comes as a surprise. They know that the narrator is not reliable and that Lily cannot actually sound exactly like a velociraptor at the characters’ level and they analyse this incongruity as humorous at viewers’ level because their faces are not threatened. Humour also rises from the fact that Lily tries to euphemise her sickness, stating that she has to “blow her nose”, once the real cause of her illness is already common knowledge among her friends.

3.4 Combination of the verbal mode and the music mode (HIMYM 5x06)

The third occurrence is a combination of the verbal mode and music/sound that can be found in HIMYM 5x06.

- (4) TED (narrator): In the fall of 2009, a new couple had moved in upstairs. We hadn’t met them yet, but we could hear them all the time. They were always... Well, kids, let’s just say they were always *playing the bagpipes*.
Bagpipes start playing.
ROBIN: Okay, this is ridiculous. I can’t believe those two are still *bagpiping*.
TED: I know. It’s been six hours. Must be that *Tantric bagpiping* that Sting is into.

ROBIN: She keeps yelling out for him to *play the bagpipes harder*, but it sounds like *he's bagpiping her pretty hard*. There's a glass of water in my bedroom that's vibrating like Jurassic Park.

TED: You have neighbors! Shut the *bagpipes* up!

In this excerpt, *play the bagpipes* and *bagpipes* unmistakably replaces the F-word. The metaphor is *in absentia* because there is no explicit mention of the target domain (SEX) in any mode, but it is nevertheless easily identifiable. This might be due to two reasons: firstly, the metaphor is semi-lexicalised. The supra-conceptual metaphor SEX IS A GAME is one of the most productive conceptual metaphors for SEX in English and includes occurrences of one sexual partner being conceptualised as a music instrument being played by the other (Crespo Fernández 2008; Terry 2019). As a consequence, it is easier to retrieve the target domain because the two domains are already associated, even though the use of the specific instrument *bagpipe* is creative and leaning on absurdity. Secondly, in the visual mode, the target tabooed domain is represented indirectly or metonymically through a superimposition of the image-schema EFFECT-FOR-CAUSE (Ted and Robin's irritation at the noise) and the metonymy FACIAL EXPRESSION FOR EMOTION. Their reaction reflects the experiential correlation that can be perceived between hearing one's neighbours play a musical instrument and hearing one's neighbour engage in sexual intercourse – the correlation being that both can be perceived as excessive noise for neighbours.

The aim of the substitution is supposedly for Ted's children not to be shocked. Ted sanitises his stories throughout the show because it would not be considered as “good parenting” to do otherwise. More specifically, the bagpipe is used to protect their negative face, “the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction – i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (Brown/Levinson 1978: 61). Ted's children are a mirror for the viewers, whose negative faces are also protected. The substitution also allows the creators and directors to protect their positive face (positive face: “the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants”), as defined by Brown/Levinson (1978: 61). The occurrence could be analysed as a euphemistic dysphemism since the music we can hear from the bagpipes is euphemistic, but there is clearly no intention of sparing the viewers (“he's bagpiping her pretty hard”). Euphemistic dysphemisms tend to be used for

humorous purposes, and the humorous dimension is reinforced by multi-modality because the bagpipe sounds occur *after* the metaphor is established in the verbal mode (“let’s just say they were always playing the bagpipes”) but are still unexpected and draw attention to the blatant lie.

Additionally, the analysis that was conducted on “holy confetti” could be applied to “shut the bagpipes up”, which is also a euphemistic dysphemism since the very act of swearing confers a dysphemistic dimension to the utterance, even though the aim is once again humorous.

3.5 Combination of the verbal mode (oral and written), the visual mode and the music mode (HIMYM 2x06)

The fourth occurrence can be analysed as both an extended linguistic metaphor stemming from the conceptual metaphor SEDUCTION IS HUNTING (in this case, hunting on a safari) or as an elaboration of the lexicalised metaphorical expression *a cougar* which designates an older woman having relations with younger men (HIMYM 2x06). It relies on a combination of four different modes: the verbal mode (both oral and written language), the visual mode and the music mode.

- (5) BARNEY: Okay, let’s take a look. Oh, yeah, that’s a *cougar* all right. A prime *specimen*. See, you can identify a *cougar* by a few key characteristics. Start with the hair. The cougar keeps up with current hairstyles as a form of *camouflage*. The *prey* may not realize that he’s engaged with a *cougar* until he’s already being *dragged, helpless, back to her lair*. Now, the *blouse*. The cougar displays *maximum cleavage possible* to *captivate her prey*. If you’re watching them bounce, she’s about to *pounce*. See the *claws? Long and sharp, to ward off rival females...* Or open *alimony checks*. Yeah, this one’s a beauty. Okay, let the *hunt* begin.

The target domain, which includes the woman to be seduced, is represented in the verbal (with pronoun *she* or with *alimony checks*) and visual domains (there are close shots on the woman Barney is talking about), while the source domain is represented in the verbal mode (both orally with Barney’s speech and the mention of *specimen, prey, lair, claws*, etc. and visually as some of the words belonging to the source domain are in capital letters at the bottom of the screen: *THE HAIR, THE BLOUSE, THE CLAWS*, see figure 3), visual mode (Barney

hiding behind the potted plant as a predator lurking behind a bush, see figure 4) and music mode (the music in the background resembles one that could be heard in a wildlife documentary and therefore belongs to the source domain).



Fig. 3: The claws (*HIMYM 2x06*)



Fig. 4: Barney and Marshall hiding behind the potted plants (*HIMYM 2x06*)

The correspondences are explicit in this occurrence: the woman is a cougar, the nails are the claws, taking care of your physical appearance is camouflage, a home is a lair, other women are rival females, seduction is hunting, and so on. Interestingly, younger men are conceptualised as both prey and hunters, which highlights the reciprocity in seduction. This example differs from the previous ones in several respects. Firstly, it relies on a semi-lexicalised metaphor in which the correspondences are much more precisely established and elaborated. Not

only are they identifiable, but they are also explicitly expressed. Secondly, as it is a semi-lexicalised metaphor, the association of the two domains is not incongruous, so the source of humour has to be found elsewhere. The fact that the metaphor should be extended contributes to making it salient, especially as it is extended in four different modes, which is rather unusual: spoken language, written language, music and the visual mode. This is the incongruous element which becomes salient and which, associated with a “playful frame of mind” (Dyner 2009a: 28), can lead to a humorous interpretation.

This is also a dysphemistic metaphor that conceptualises seduction and sexual relations as relying on violence and highlights the sexist, problematic behaviour that Barney displays throughout the sitcom by dehumanising women. This scene was probably meant to be interpreted as a dysphemistic euphemism in 2006, when it was broadcast, but it seems safe to assume that 2024 viewers are less likely to react positively to the humorous intent. The Internet swarms with articles and comments that adopt a retrospective point of view and users rightfully condemn Barney’s problematic, toxic behaviour, mostly towards women.⁴ Characteristics such as gender and age play a preponderant part in determining whether the hypothetical distance outweighs the temporal distance (McGraw/Williams/Warren 2013: 567) and each individual might feel that their face is more or less threatened.

3.6 Combination of the verbal mode and the visual mode and repetition (*HIMYM 3x05*)

The last occurrence I will analyse mostly is a recurring conceptualisation of the action of smoking weed as eating a sandwich. It can be found in at least 14 episodes⁵ throughout the sitcom, in more or less obvious forms. The metaphor is explained once in *HIMYM 3x05*, the episode in which the source domain EATING replaces the target domain SMOKING in the verbal mode:

⁴ See for example <https://screenrant.com/himym-barney-stinson-quotes-havent-aged-well/>.

⁵ https://how-i-met-your-mother.fandom.com/wiki/Eating_a_Sandwich.

- (6) FUTURE TED (narrator): Kids, to understand this story you need to know that your Uncle Marshall was doing something that lots of college kids do. How do I say this? He was... uh, let's say '*eating a sandwich*'.

More specifically, in the visual mode, the sandwich replaces the joint and the target domain is metonymically represented by Marshall, who snorts with laughter and is blatantly under the influence of marijuana; this is a visual representation of the EFFECT-FOR-CAUSE metonymy (figure 5). This metaphor relies on experiential correlation between the domains of EATING and SMOKING, as they both involve carrying something to one's mouth with one's hand. The shape of the sandwich and the gestures used while eating it are evidently imported from the domain of SMOKING. There might also be some underlying metonymic motivation as the consumption of marijuana is known to promote the release of a hormone that stimulates hunger. The correspondences are quite easily identifiable: the joint is a sandwich, puffing is chewing, etc. In some respect, this occurrence is similar to the example analysed in 2.4 as the substitution is also a pretext for Ted's children not to be shocked but is actually a euphemistic dysphemism as there is no intention of sparing the viewers.



Fig. 5: Marshall "eating a sandwich" (*HIMYM 3x05*)

In another scene taken from the same episode, the metaphor is extended verbally, which contributes to the humorous dimension, notably with the distortion of the set phrase "puff puff pass" into "chew chew chew swallow", chanted by the characters while Lily is smoking (figure 6).



Fig. 6: Lily “eating a sandwich” (*HIMYM* 3x05)

As in the majority of the occurrences analysed previously, humorousness in this episode partly relies on the novelty of the association of the two domains, which may be surprising to the viewers, and on the fact that saliency is reinforced by the multimodal representation of the source domain. However, the humorous dimension is strengthened by the recurrence of the metaphor throughout the series. In the episodes that follow this first mention (see Figure 7), the source domain is very often only visually represented by a sandwich, while the target domain is always represented metonymically, either through the EFFECT-FOR-CAUSE metonymy (which represents the characters under the influence of marijuana or through smoke in the room) or through a plastic bag that contains the sandwich. *Sandwiches* is substituted for *marinated steak subs* in one episode; the fact that it should start with the same phonemic sequence as *marijuana* (/ˈmæɪrɪ/) also participates in the humorous process.



Fig. 7: "Eating a sandwich" in different episodes

These recurring allusions to *HIMYM 3x05* throughout the series are rewarding for faithful viewers, who recognise the metaphor for what it is and enjoy the humorous effect of the repetition, all the more so as the sandwiches appear quite unexpectedly on the screen. The small variations (in the size of the sandwich, for example) also contribute to adding surprising elements and maintaining the humorous effect while minimising the weariness that may emerge by force of habit.

4. Conclusions

Metaphors for taboo domains are prototypically resorted to X-phemistically in order to protect one's face. In *HIMYM* they partly fulfil this role, as some of them are supposedly used to avoid shocking Ted's children at character's level. However, in the occurrences mentioned in this paper, the multimodal metaphors are first and foremost used for humorous purposes. Forceville (2016: 26–28) argues that the genre of the film (or TV series) should be taken into account to analyse metaphors in films because "metaphors 'behave' to some extent differently in different discourse genres", and the fact that the occurrences of multimodal metaphors I analysed should occur in a sitcom indicates that the context is playful and makes humorous interpretation

possible. Humour is also achieved through a combination of several mechanisms among the following.

Firstly, the tabooed target domain is often represented metonymically with FACIAL EXPRESSION FOR EMOTION or EFFECT-FOR-CAUSE to hide its most offensive or repulsive features so that the context may be identified as safe and playful. Secondly, there systematically is a form of incongruity between the source domain and the target domain, although this characteristic is more readily found in creative metaphors, in which the association of the source and the target is more unexpected to the viewers than in semi-lexicalised metaphors. Thirdly, multimodality participates in the humorous process insofar as it contributes to increasing the saliency of the metaphor. The role of the representation of the source domain in a non-verbal mode tends to exceed the role generally fulfilled by metaphors to construct one domain in terms of another: the non-verbal representation of the source domain comes in addition to the verbal mode but does not add new elements (except maybe in the last example). Additionally, it is only available at the level of the viewers, not at the level of the characters: the characters do not see the confetti and the sandwiches, or hear the bagpipes, the wildlife documentary music and the velociraptor growls. Therefore, the representation of the source domain in a non-verbal mode entails unexpectedness and sometimes even induces absurdity. Fourthly, the extension and/or repetition of the metaphor in one or several episodes can also participate in the humorous dimension, especially when it is coupled with variation (in the mode, in details such as for the visual representation of sandwiches, etc.).

Not all elements need to be present. For example, a relative lack of creativity in the association between the domains can be compensated by an accumulation of different modes (see 2.5). The analyses I conducted allowed me to explain how multimodality can participate in the humorous process in the X-phemistic metaphors in *HIMYM*, but analyses should be conducted on other corpora as those constitute isolated examples.

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