

# Pragmalinguistic Analysis of Humor in the Third Season of the British TV Series Blackadder

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Master's thesis / Diplomski rad

2023

*Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj:* **University of Zagreb, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište u Zagrebu, Filozofski fakultet**

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:131:774599>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2024-07-29**



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**Pragmalinguistic Analysis of Humor in the Third Season of the British TV Series  
Blackadder**

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Table of Contents

1. Abstract.....	1
2. The History of <i>Blackadder</i> .....	2
3. British Humor.....	2
4. The Cooperative principle.....	4
5. The Cooperative Principle in the Third Season of <i>Blackadder</i> .....	5
5.1. The Maxim of Quality.....	7
5.2. The Maxim of Manner.....	10
5.3. The Maxim of Quantity.....	11
5.4. The Maxim of Relation.....	12
5.5. Breaking Multiple Maxims Simultaneously.....	14
6. Sarcasm.....	16
7. Humor and the Theories of Humor.....	19
7.1. Theories of Humor in <i>Blackadder</i> .....	22
8. Conclusion.....	26
9. Literature.....	29

## **1. Abstract**

*Blackadder* is a British television sitcom that aired from 1983 to 1989. It was written by Rowan Atkinson, Richard Curtis, and Ben Elton, and starred Rowan Atkinson as the main character, Edmund Blackadder. The series follows the adventures of the cunning and scheming Edmund Blackadder and his bumbling servant Baldrick in different periods of British history. This paper will focus on the third season of *Blackadder*, also known as *Blackadder the Third*, on how it breaks Grice's maxims related to the cooperative principle, on how sarcasm was used in the show, and which theories of humor could be applied to analyze the jokes in the show. The paper seeks to identify every time that a maxim is broken in the third season of the series, which of the four maxims are broken the most and in which way they are broken. It also aims to identify every time that sarcasm is used in the third season of the series and which multimodal markers of sarcasm are used. Finally, the aim of this paper is to look at certain jokes in the show through the lens of different theories of humor, such as the superiority theory and incongruity theory, and to identify the theory of humor which could be applied to most of the jokes in the third season of the series.

Keywords: Blackadder, cooperative principle, Grice's maxims, sarcasm, superiority theory, incongruity theory

## 2. The History of Blackadder

There are four seasons of Blackadder and each season is set in a different time period. The first season of *Blackadder*, also known as *Black Adder*, aired in 1983 and it takes place in 1485 during the reign of King Richard III and King Richard IV. In this season, Edmund Blackadder is a scheming nobleman, the son of King Richard IV and is accompanied by his servants Baldrick and Percy.

The second season, also known as *Blackadder II* aired in 1986 and it takes place in the 16th century during the reign of Queen Elisabeth I. Once again, he is accompanied by his two servants Percy and Baldrick, who is much less intelligent in this season. Unlike Baldrick, Blackadder became much more cunning and intelligent in this season and uses much more sarcasm from this season onwards.

The third season of *Blackadder*, also known as *Blackadder the Third*, aired in 1987. In this season the character of Edmund Blackadder is portrayed as a butler to Prince George. Blackadder is still cunning and scheming, but he is more restrained and resigned in this season, as he is serving a master who is not particularly intelligent or capable. He is still accompanied by his servant Baldrick.

The fourth and final season of *Blackadder*, also known as *Blackadder Goes Forth*, aired in 1989. It is set during World War I where Captain Edmund Blackadder, accompanied by lieutenant George and private Baldrick, tries to find a way to escape from the front lines of the war.

Besides the four seasons of the show, three specials were released after the main show ended. *Blackadder: The Cavalier Years* is a special episode, which aired in 1988, is a prequel to the first season of *Blackadder* and follows the character of Edmund Blackadder during the English Civil War. *Blackadder's Christmas Carol* is a special episode, which aired in 1988. It is a parody of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, with the character of Ebenezer Blackadder playing the role of Ebenezer Scrooge. Finally, *Blackadder: Back & Forth* is a special episode, which aired in 1999, is a time-travel adventure that follows the character of Edmund Blackadder as he travels through different periods of history.<sup>1</sup>

## 3. British Humor

Paul Jennings describes British humor as “subtle, airy, real but elusive, accepted as a national trait but apparently quite unexportable, a necessary part of our modern consciousness but already fully formed in its essentials by Shakespeare's time” (Jennings, 1970, p. 69). Jennings

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<sup>1</sup> General information about the show was taken from *The True History of the Blackadder* (Roberts, 2013).

emphasizes the fact that the roots of British humor can be seen as early as in Shakespeare's time. Jennings also claims that "Humour is indivisible really, because it's a human characteristic, and to that extent there's no such thing as 'national' humour; and perhaps it's quite likely that our distinguishing tone of voice will disappear as humour becomes recognized more and more as something socially necessary" (Jennings, 1970, p. 70). Although there are definitely some special characteristics of British humor that come to mind such as sarcasm, puns, self deprecation, Jennings believes that it is hard to divide humor on the national basis. It is worth noting that Jennings wrote his paper in 1970 and the perception of British humor might have changed since then.

Richard Alexander talks about the history of British humor since the end of the 19th century. He starts by citing music halls as a big influence on British humor. Music halls were at the height of their popularity in between 1890 and 1912 and he mentions that Charlie Chaplin, who is best known for his film career in the United States, started as a performer in music halls (Alexander, 1984). Alexander also mentions seaside resorts as one of the places where British humor was evolving as many families would go to seaside resorts such as Blackpool, Brighton, Margate and Scarborough (Alexander, 1984).

The big evolution in the transmission of British humor came in 1922 when the radio was invented (Alexander, 1984). In the beginnings of the radio, the humor was mostly in the form of sketches by humorists (Alexander, 1984). In the 1940s the radio played an important role as a morale booster during The Second World War, while the fifties were the 'golden age' of radio comedy as the 'wireless' had been joined by television as a 'mass medium' (Alexander, 1984).

"While there had been only 200,000 licence-holders in 1950, about ten and a half million people in Britain possessed a television licence by 1960. The consequences of this home-centred entertainment were drastic for the music hall. Variety was destroyed, theatres closed down." (Alexander, 1984, p. 67)

As television became more popular in the 1960s, the popularity of music halls died out and most solo entertainers were mostly driven out by the popularity of television (Alexander, 1984). One mode of comedy which was gaining popularity was satire. Alexander mentions the "television breakthrough of *That Was The Week That Was* (TWTWTW) which firmly established 'satire' as a nationwide concept" (Alexander, 1984, p. 69). This breakthrough inspired many TV shows such as for example *the Monty Python*. According to Alexander, this type of comedy, with its visual slapstick was firmly established with the *Fawlty Towers* series by John Cleese (Alexander, 1984). *Fawlty Towers* was a very popular comedy that ran from 1975 to 1979. Four years after *Fawlty Towers* ended, another classic British TV show called *Blackadder* started airing on BBC.

The humor in *Blackadder* is often irreverent and satirical. It often makes use of wordplay and sarcasm. The show portrays British historical figures throughout different time periods and

often makes fun of them or exaggerates their flaws. For example the show's portrayal of Queen Elizabeth I in the second season is significantly different from the traditional portrayal of the queen as a strong and capable ruler. In *Blackadder* she is portrayed as infantile, immature and not very intelligent.

One of the characteristics of the show is its use of a recurring cast of characters, with each season featuring a different iteration of Blackadder and his associates. This feature of the show allows the complex and humorous relationships to develop between the characters, as well as the exploration of different historical periods and settings.

Another key element of *Blackadder's* sense of humor is its clever use of language. The show's characters often engage in verbal sparring and use clever wordplay and insult one another. Moreover, they frequently violate the maxims associated with the cooperative principle as they often try to deceive or outmaneuver one another for their own gain. This creates a sense of absurdity and unpredictability that is central to the show's sense of humor.

#### **4. The Cooperative principle**

The cooperative principle is a concept introduced by philosopher H.P. Grice in his 1975 paper *Logic and Conversation*. In this paper, Grice identifies four maxims that govern how people communicate with each other in conversation. These maxims are the maxims of quality, quantity, relevance, and manner.

Grice explains these maxims in more detail:

“The category of QUANTITY relates to the quantity of information to be provided, and under it fall the following maxims:

1. Make your contribution as informative as it is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than it is required. (Grice, 1975, p. 45)”

“Under the category of QUALITY falls a supermaxim - 'Try to make your contribution one that is true' – and two more specific maxims:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.” (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

“Under the category of RELEVANCE I place a single maxim, namely 'be relevant’” (Grice, 1975, p. 46).

“Finally under the category of MANNER, which I understand as relating not (like the previous categories) to what is said but, rather, to HOW what is said is to be said, I include the supermaxim – 'Be perspicuous' – and various maxims such as:

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly.” (Grice, 1975, p. 46)

The cooperative principle is based on the fact that successful communication is possible only when all the participants collaborate in order to understand each other. Therefore, in order to achieve understanding between each other, people must follow certain conversational norms, such as being truthful, relevant, and unambiguous in their communication, as can be seen from Grice's maxims.

“The claim that jokes could be viewed in terms of violations of maxims dates back to Grice himself” (Attardo, 1994, pp. 271-272). Attardo then gives examples of jokes which violate each maxim:

### **Quantity**

“Excuse me, do you know what time it is?”

'Yes.'” (Attardo, 1994, p. 272).

The maxim of quantity is broken because it breaks the submaxim “Make your contribution as informative as it is required” (Grice, 1975, p. 45).

### **Relation**

“How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

'Fish!'" (Attardo, 1994, p. 272).

The maxim of relation is broken because the answer is not relevant.

### **Manner**

“Do you believe in clubs for young people?”

'Only when kindness fails.' (Attributed to W.C. Fields)” (Attardo, 1994, p. 272).

This maxim of manner is broken because the answer is ambiguous.

### **Quality**

“Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?”

'Because the fighting is over.' (Johnny Carson 1-19-90)” (Attardo, 1994, p. 272).

The maxim of quality is broken here because of the insinuation that the Vice President was a coward.

These examples will serve as a basis for the analysis of jokes in *Blackadder* and how each maxim is broken.



## 5. The Cooperative Principle in the Third Season of *Blackadder*

The four maxims of the cooperative principle are broken very frequently in the third season of the show. I watched the third season of the show, which consists of six episodes, eight times for this study. The first two times I watched it to refamiliarize myself with the content and the characters of the show. The next two times, I watched the third season of the show with a transcript and paused the show after every piece of dialogue trying to find which maxims were broken and why. The final four times I watched the show, I watched it to find how many times sarcasm occurred and which theories of humor could be applied to the dialogue found in the show, which will be explored in the later chapters. I also frequently rewatched certain parts of the show to check if I had missed some relevant details. I referred to Grice's description of maxims and submaxims (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46) to determine which maxims were broken. After writing down all the examples of broken maxims and why they were broken, I went through the examples and I counted how many times each of the maxims was broken. In the final results, there were many examples where multiple maxims were broken at the same time. Therefore, for instance, if the maxim of quality and manner were broken simultaneously, I would write down that the maxim of quality was broken once and that the maxim of manner was broken once. The breaking of multiple maxims at the same time will be talked about in one of the following chapters of the thesis. It should be noted that what constitutes breaking a certain maxim can be relative because certain examples could be interpreted in different ways. For instance, identifying the breaking of maxim of relation can be subjective since it could be argued whether something is relevant or not to the conversation. The runtime of the third season (not including the intro and end credits) is 2 hours, 45 minutes, 49 seconds. The results show that the maxim of quality is broken the most, followed by the maxim of manner, and then the maxim of quantity and relation. According to my findings, the maxim of quality is broken 90 times which means that on average it was broken every minute and 50 seconds. The maxim of manner is broken 71 times which means that it is broken on average every 2 minutes and 20 seconds. The maxim of quantity is broken 29 times which means that is broken every 5 minutes and 43 seconds while the maxim of relation is broken 24 times which means that it is broken every 6 minutes and 54 seconds. The high frequency of broken maxims in the third season of *Blackadder* suggests that the show is a very fertile source of humor, since the frequency of jokes in the show is very high, especially when we take into account the fact that not all jokes can be explained through the violations of the maxims. The frequent breaking of the maxims of the cooperative principle creates humor by highlighting the cleverness and wit of *Blackadder*, while also creating confusion and miscommunication that leads to humorous situations.

As can be seen from the results, the maxim that is broken the most is definitely the maxim of quality. The maxim is broken the most by the principal character *Blackadder* who is constantly

lying to get out of trouble or to take advantage of another character such as Prince George who is portrayed as extremely unintelligent and easy to take advantage of. Blackadder most often breaks the maxim of quality by responding sarcastically, as sarcasm is one of the defining traits of his character. He also breaks the maxim of quality by exaggerating a character's negative traits and, therefore, not telling the truth. Since Blackadder is, by far, the most intelligent of the three principal characters (Blackadder, Baldrick and Prince George), he is the one who intentionally breaks the maxim of quality since he is aware that what he is saying is false. On the other hand, Baldrick and Prince George do not break the maxim of quality nearly as much as Blackadder. When they do break it, they often break it because they say something which is false and for which they lack adequate evidence. Even though, most of the times, the maxim of quality is broken for comedic effect, there are also times where a character is simply not telling the truth and it is not seen as something that should be funny to the audience.

The maxim of manner is often broken by all characters when they are not being brief and orderly. Much of the humor in Blackadder derives from the characters going on long-winded rants about other characters. Blackadder often breaks this maxim along with quality at the same time by insulting somebody and exaggerating about the aforementioned negative traits of other characters. Just like the maxim of quantity, the breaking of the maxim of manner is often used for comedic effect.

Another maxim that is often violated in the series is the maxim of quantity. All characters break the maxim of quantity quite frequently, although not nearly as much as the maxim of quality and the maxim of manner. The maxim of quantity is broken more times by saying more than it is required than by saying less than it is required. This maxim is almost always broken for comedic effect and it is often broken when characters are using an excessively detailed and complex simile.

Finally, the maxim of relation is a maxim that is broken less than the other three maxims and it is broken far more by the characters besides Blackadder such as Baldrick and Prince George. This happens Baldrick and Prince George are portrayed as much less intelligent than Blackadder and they frequently misunderstand things Blackadder tells them and then ask about a completely irrelevant topic. While Blackadder does not break the maxim of relation as often as Baldrick and Prince George, he still breaks it sometimes, mostly intentionally.

### **5.1. The Maxim of Quality**

There are numerous instances where Blackadder is lying in order to to gain some sort of advantage over others and, therefore, breaks the maxim of quality. In the third season Blackadder is a butler so there are not many people who are below him when it comes to class. One example of a character that is below Blackadder is his servant Baldrick to whom Blackadder almost never lies

because he cannot gain anything from Baldrick. The character to whom Blackadder often lies, however, is Prince George. In the next example from the first episode of the season, Blackadder is advising the Prince on how to proceed since the motion about Prince George's impoverishment has moved to the house of Lords. Blackadder advises Prince George to bribe three hundred lords at a thousand pounds each. He claims that the bribery should amount to four hundred thousand pounds instead of three hundred thousand pounds.

**Example 1:**

**“Blackadder:** And it might also be worth bribing a few Lords, just to make sure they vote the way their consciences tell them.

**Prince George:** Oh, well, how many should we bribe, do you think?

**Blackadder:** Oh, I think three hundred, to be sure... at a thousand pounds each.

**Prince George:** Three hundred thousand pounds?

**Blackadder:** Four hundred thousand, I think you'll find, sir.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:24:18)

Blackadder can often get away with such blatant lies since the Prince is not intelligent enough to understand that Blackadder is lying to him.

Another example of Blackadder lying to the Prince for his own gain can also be seen in episode one of the third season when Prince George laments that somebody is always stealing his socks and Blackadder responds that it is impossible, however his facial expression makes it obvious that Blackadder is the one that is stealing the Prince's socks and selling them for a profit.

**Example 2:**

**“Prince George:** Yes, socks! Run out again! Why is it that no matter how many millions of pairs of socks I buy, I never seem to have any?

**Blackadder:** Sir, with your forgiveness, there is another, even weightier problem.

**Prince George:** They just disappear! Honestly, you'd think someone was coming in here, stealing the damn things and then selling them off.

**Blackadder:** Impossible, sir. Only you and I have access to your socks.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:04:05)

The maxim of quality is also often broken alongside the maxim of manner when characters are exaggerating. Blackadder is the character who breaks these two maxims at the same time the most as he is the one who most often insults other characters by exaggerating their negative traits. The following example is from episode two, an episode in which Blackadder believes that Baldrick has burned Dr. Samuel Johnson's first English dictionary. Dr. Samuel Johnson left it with Blackadder and expects to receive it the next day. Since Johnson's admirers threatened to hurt Blackadder if he does not bring the dictionary, Blackadder tries to do the impossible task of

rewriting the dictionary in one night. Prince George and Baldrick offer him help but he refuses and breaks the maxim of quality and manner at the same time by exaggerating how useless the help from Baldrick and Prince George would be.

**Example 3:**

**“Prince George:** Perhaps you'd like me to lend a hand, Blackadder. I'm not as stupid as I look.

**Baldrick:** I am as stupid as I look, sir, but if I can help, I will.

**Blackadder:** Well, it's very kind of you both, but I fear your services might be as useful as a barber shop on the steps of the guillotine.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:18:15)

One of the most frequent ways Blackadder breaks the maxim of quality is by using sarcasm. Since he is usually the smartest person in the room, most of the characters either do not understand that Blackadder is being sarcastic or ignore it. The following example is from the fourth episode of the third season where Blackadder has been instructed to invite two actors, Mossop and Kenrick, to teach the Prince about the basics of acting. At first they refuse, saying that they need to practice so they can be as good as possible for their audience. However, after Blackadder mentions that Prince George is the one who wants an audience with the actors, they immediately show that they do not care about the audience at all. Blackadder compliments them sarcastically for their 'artistic integrity'

**Example 4:**

**“Blackadder:** Right, I'll tell the Prince that you can't make it.

**Kenrick:** Prince?

**Blackadder:** Sorry, yes. Didn't I mention that? It's the Prince Regent. Sorry you can't make it.

**Mossop:** No, no, no, no please, no. Please wait, sir. Off, off! I think we can find some time, do you not, Mr. Keanrick?

**Kenrick:** Definitely, Mr. Mossop.

**Blackadder:** No, no, you've got your beloved audience to think about.

**Kenrick:** Sod the proles! We'll come.

**Mossop:** Yes, worthless bastards to a man.

**Blackadder:** It's nice to see artistic integrity thriving so strongly in the theatre. Well, this afternoon at four then, at the Palace.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:08:19)

While Blackadder is the character that breaks the maxim of quality the most, there are also some instances where Baldrick and the Prince break it. However, it often happens unintentionally as they are most of the time unaware that they are breaking it. The following example is from the fourth episode of the third season where Blackadder has been telling George about the lower class being enraged with the upper class and that there is a possibility that Prince George could be in danger. Prince George becomes paranoid and starts seeing danger everywhere. After the

conversation he sees Baldrick cleaning with a sponge and he says that he is holding a bomb. While he is not saying something he believes to be false, which is one of the submaxims of quality, he is definitely breaking the other submaxim of quality which is “Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence” (Grice, 1975, p. 46). Therefore, Prince George is unintentionally breaking the maxim of quality.

**Example 5:**

**Prince George:** Egads, it's that oppressed mass again!

**Blackadder:** No sir, that is Baldrick spring cleaning.

**Prince George:** But look, he's got a bomb!

**Blackadder:** That's not a bomb, sir, that's a sponge.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:09:11)

## 5.2. The Maxim of Manner

The maxim of manner is often broken alongside the maxim of quantity since the submaxim of quantity “Do not make your contribution more informative than it is required” (Grice, 1975, p. 45). and the submaxim of manner “Be brief” (Grice, 1975, p. 46) overlap. An example where both the maxim of manner and the maxim of quantity are broken simultaneously can be found in the second episode when Prince George meets Dr. Samuel Johnson and Dr. Johnson tells Prince George that he has finished his dictionary using very long and rarely used words to show off his knowledge of the English Vocabulary.

**Example 6:**

**George:** Ah, Dr. Johnson! Damn cold day!

**Dr. Johnson:** Indeed it is, sir, but a very fine one, for I celebrated last night the encyclopaedic implementation of my premeditated orchestration of demotic Anglo-Saxon.

**George:** Nope, didn't catch any of that.

**Dr. Johnson:** Well, I simply observed, sir, that I'm felicitous, since, during the course of the penultimate solar sojourn, I terminated my uninterrupted categorisation of the vocabulary of our post-Norman tongue.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0;05:52)

The maxim of manner is also very often broken alongside the maxim of quality when Blackadder is exaggerating the negative qualities because exaggerating is obviously not telling the truth and he is usually not being brief and orderly when he does it. In the next example, Blackadder finds out that Baldrick has burnt Dr. Samuel Johnson's dictionary and demands that he and Baldrick go to Mrs. Miggins and find out where Johnson is keeping a copy. When Baldrick asks why, Blackadder snaps at Baldrick and exaggerates what he will do to Baldrick and, therefore, breaks the maxim of quality and manner at the same time.

### **Example 7:**

**“Blackadder:** We are going to go to Mrs. Miggins, we're going to find out where Dr. Johnson keeps a copy of that dictionary, and then you are going to steal it.

**Baldrick:** Me?

**Blackadder:** Yes, you!

**Baldrick:** Why me?

**Blackadder:** Because you burnt it, Baldrick.

**Baldrick:** But then I'll go to hell forever for stealing.

**Blackadder:** Baldrick, believe me, Eternity in the company of Beelzebub and all his hellish instruments of death will be a picnic compared to five minutes with me and this pencil, if we can't replace this dictionary.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:13:10)

### **5.3. The Maxim of Quantity**

The maxim of quantity is also broken many times when characters give out too much information. Blackadder is once again the character that breaks the maxim of quantity the most and he often breaks it in conjunction with the maxim of manner since when he does give out excessive information his speech is also not brief and orderly and is also often ambiguous. The next example is from the third episode of the third season when Blackadder and Baldrick are imprisoned by a French revolutionary and are awaiting their punishment. They are waiting in the cell and pondering how to escape. Blackadder then says that he has no intention of dying and then mentions that he wants to be young and wild, middle aged and rich and that he wants to grow old and bother people by pretending to be deaf. That line breaks the maxim of quantity and manner because Blackadder gives out too much information and breaks the maxim of manner because it is not brief and orderly. It also breaks the maxim of relation since it is not relevant to the conversation Baldrick and Blackadder are having.

### **Example 8:**

**“Baldrick:** It doesn't really matter, 'cause the Scarlet Pimpernel will save us, anyway.

**Blackadder:** No he won't, Baldrick. Either I think up an idea, or, tomorrow, we die, which, Baldrick, I have to tell you, I have no intention of doing, because I want to be young and wild, and then I want to be middle-aged and rich, and then I want to be old and annoy people by pretending that I'm deaf. Just be quiet and let me think.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:18:48)

Maxim of quantity is also very often broken with long similes which are mostly used by Blackadder himself. In the next example Blackadder is talking to Baldrick about his Scottish cousin McAdder. He uses two similes in his this example but the one that breaks the maxim of quality and

definitely gives out too much information is the one where he mentions that his cousin McAdder 'is madder than Mad Jack McMad the winner of last year's Mr Madman competition'.

**Example 9:**

“**Blackadder:** And I love chops and sauce but I don't seek their advice. I hate it when McAdder turns up. He's such a frog-eyed, beetle-browed basket-case.

**Baldrick:** He's the spitting image of you.

**Blackadder:** No he's not. We're about as similar as two completely... dissimilar things in a pod. What's the old tartan throw-back banging on about this time? “Have come South for the rebellion.” Oh God! Surprise, surprise... “Staying with Miggins. The time has come. Best sword and Scotland. Insurrection... Blood... Large bowl of porridge... Rightful claim to throne...” He's mad. He's mad. He's madder than Mad Jack McMad the winner of last year's Mr Madman competition.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:02:45)

Even though the maxim of quantity is mostly broken by giving out excessive information, there are some examples where Blackadder is not as talkative as in the previous example and breaks the maxim of quantity by saying less than necessary. In the fifth episode of the third season, Prince George is lamenting the fact that he has lost all his cash in the game of cards. He says that the goal of the game 'is to give away all your money as quickly as possible'. Then, he asks Blackadder whether he has heard of it. Blackadder simply responds with 'Vaguely sir' without telling the Prince that losing your money as quickly as possible is not the goal of the game.

**Example 10:**

“**Blackadder:** But sir, what about the five thousand pounds that Parliament voted you only last week to drink yourself to death with?

**Prince George:** All gone I'm afraid. You see, I've discovered this terrifically fun new game. It's called "cards". What happens is, you sit round the table with your friends, and you deal out five "cards" each, and then the object of the game is to give away all your money as quickly as possible. Do you know it?

**Blackadder:** Vaguely sir, yes.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:02:32)

#### **5.4. The Maxim of Relation**

The maxim of relation is mostly broken by Prince George unintentionally by saying something that is completely irrelevant to the conversation. In the following example of Prince George breaking the maxim of relation can be seen in the first episode where he is asked by the reporter about his prospects in the campaign and he mentions that no matter how many pairs of socks a man buys, he never seems to have enough.

**Example 11:**

**Mr. Hannah:** Prince George, hello.

**Prince George:** Good evening.

**Mr. Hannah:** ...and good evening, Colin. Er, how do you see your prospects in this campaign?

**George:** Well, er, first, I'd like a word about the disgraceful circumstances in which this election arose. We paid for this seat, and I think it's a damn liberty that we should have to stand for it as well. And another thing, why is it that no matter how many pairs of socks a man buys, he never seems to have enough?" (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:15:57)

The next example is from the sixth episode of *Blackadder* where the Duke of Wellington is threatening to kill the Prince because he feels insulted that the Prince went out with his daughters. Blackadder tells the Prince that they should swap clothes:

**Example 12:**

**Blackadder:** There's no alternative, we must swap clothes.

**Prince George:** Oh fantastic, yes, dressing up. I love it. It's just like that story, ah, "The Prince And The Porpoise".

**Blackadder:** "...and the Pauper" sir.

**Prince George:** Oh yes! Yes yes yes, 'The Prince and the Porpoise and the Pauper'" (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:11:14)

Later in the episode, Wellington is at the door of Prince George's home and Baldrick and George are confused what is happening due to the fact that George and Blackadder have swapped clothes. Blackadder, slightly annoyed by their stupidity, explains the situation and the Prince asks 'what about the porpoise?', calling back to their earlier exchange in the episode and breaking the maxim of relation since the porpoise does not have anything to do with the conversation they are having at the time.

**Blackadder:** Don't even try to work it out Baldrick. Two people you know well have exchanged coats and now you don't know which is which.

**Prince George:** I must say I'm pretty confused myself! Which one of us is Wellington?

**Blackadder:** Wellington is the man at the door.

**Prince George:** Oh. And the porpoise?" (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0;12:10)

Another example of George breaking the maxim of relation happens in the same episode when Blackadder enters the room and George explains to Blackadder what he dreamt without being asked.

**Example 13:**

**Prince George:** Ah, Blackadder. It has been a wild afternoon full of strange omens. I dreamt that a large eagle circled the room three times and then got into bed with me and took all the blankets.



And then I saw that it wasn't an eagle at all but a large black snake. Also Duncan's horses did turn and eat each other. As usual. Good portents for your duel, do you think?" (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0;22:37)

Even though George is usually the one breaking the maxim of relation, there are also many examples where Blackadder is breaking it. However, unlike Baldrick and Prince George, he often does it on purpose to annoy the person he is talking to. The next example is from episode one of the third season where Pitt the Younger wants to bankrupt the Prince. Pitt the Younger confronts Blackadder and talks about his childhood, how he was bullied and vowed to work every day to become the prime minister so he could fight sloth and privilege. Pitt the Younger mentioned a crumpet on his face during that conversation and Blackadder responds by focusing on that crumpet which is not relevant to the point Pitt the Younger was making. In this example, Blackadder is breaking the maxim of relation to annoy the young prime minister.

**Example 14:**

**Prince George:** I say, Blackadder, are you sure this is the PM? Seems like a bit of an oily tick to me. When I was at school, we used to line up four or five of his sort, make them bend over, and use them as a toast rack.

**Pitt the Younger:** You don't surprise me, sir — I know your sort. Once, it was I who stood in the big, cold schoolroom, a hot crumpet burning my cheeks with shame. Since that day, I have been busy, every hour God sends, working to become Prime Minister and fight sloth and privilege wherever I found it.

**Blackadder:** I trust you weren't too busy to remove the crumpet..." (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:13:44)

### **5.5. Breaking Multiple Maxims Simultaneously**

The breaking of multiple maxims simultaneously has been mentioned in a previous chapter. After counting how many times each maxim was broken, I went through all the examples of broken maxims that I found and counted how many times multiple maxims were broken simultaneously. I found that multiple maxims were broken simultaneously 59 times. The maxims which are broken simultaneously the most are the maxim of quality and manner which happens when one of the characters is exaggerating and not being brief and orderly and Blackadder is the one who most often breaks these two maxims simultaneously. Manner is also very often broken at the same time as the submaxim of quantity of making your contribution more informative than it is required often overlaps with the submaxim of manner of not being brief. The maxim of relation is often broken at the same time as quantity when characters are making some comments which are not relevant to that conversation. They also break the maxim of quantity as they give more information than it is

necessary. Only two maxims are broken at the same time in the majority of examples. However, there are some examples where three maxims and even all four maxims are broken at the same time.

The following example is from the second episode in which Baldrick burnt Dr. Johnsons dictionary. Dr. Johnson asks Blackadder, who was responsible for looking after the dictionary, where his dictionary is located.

**Example 15:**

**“Dr. Johnson:** Where is my Dictionary?

**Blackadder:** And what dictionary would this be?

**Dr. Johnson:** The one that has taken eighteen hours of every day for the last ten years. My mother died; I hardly noticed. My father cut off his head and fried it in garlic in the hope of attracting my attention; I scarcely looked up from my work. My wife brought armies of lovers to the house, who worked in droves so that she might bring up a huge family of bastards. I cannot...

**Blackadder:** Am I to presume that my elaborate bluff has not worked?” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:24:46)

Blackadder feigns ignorance when asked about the dictionary and Dr. Johnson has a monologue describing how hard he worked to write his dictionary. He breaks all four maxims in his speech. He breaks the maxim of quality while exaggerating the details, as some of the events described in his speech are not possible. At the same time, he breaks the maxim of manner by not being brief and orderly, the maxim of quantity as he gives excessive information about what was happening during the time he was writing the dictionary. Finally, he breaks the maxim of relation as much of what he says is not relevant to the conversation such as the “armies of lovers who worked in droves to bring up a huge family of bastards”.

Another example of all four maxims being broken at the same time can be seen in the same episode when Baldrick asks Blackadder what is wrong and Blackadder answers.

**Example 16:**

**“Baldrick:** Something wrong, Mr. B?

**Blackadder:** Oh, something's always wrong, Balders. The fact that I'm not a millionaire aristocrat with the sexual capacity of a rutting rhino is a constant niggle. But, today, something's even wronger. That globulous fraud, Dr. Johnson, is coming to tea.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:03:12)

Blackadder breaks the maxim of quality by exaggerating, the maxim of manner by not being brief, the maxim of relation by mentioning his wish at all since Blackadder gives irrelevant information when answering Baldrick’s question and the maxim of quantity since he is giving excessive information while answering the question.

There is one more example where Blackadder breaks all four maxims at the same time and it happens in the third episode of the third season where Blackadder tells the Prince that he went to France and rescued a French aristocrat. However, he has never actually been to France and he is lying to win a bet. Blackadder goes on to describe the events which never happened.

**Example 17:**

**Prince George:** So, tell me, Blackadder: how the devil did you get him out?

**Blackadder:** Sir, it is an extraordinary tale of courage and heroism which I blush from telling by myself, but seeing as there's no one else...

**Baldrick:** I could try.

**Blackadder:** We left England in good weather, but that was as far as our luck held. In the middle of Dover Harbour, we were struck by a tidal wave. I was forced to swim to Boulogne with the unconscious Baldrick tucked into my trousers. Then, we were taken to Paris, where I was summarily tried and condemned to death, and then hung by the larger of my testicles from the walls of the Bastille. It was then that I decided I had had enough.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:24:56)

In the example, Blackadder breaks the maxim of quality since these events have never happened, the maxim of manner by not being brief when explaining what supposedly happened, the maxim of quantity by giving excessive information and, finally, the maxim of relation when he says that Baldrick was tucked into his trousers while swimming to Boulogne since he is adding unnecessary details to his story.

These examples show that breaking multiple maxims simultaneously in *Blackadder* creates humor by subverting the audience's expectations and creating surprise through unexpected or absurd responses.

## 6. Sarcasm

After watching the third season four times and having written down all the examples of broken maxims in the third season, I noticed that the maxim of quality was by far the most broken maxim in the show. Moreover, I observed that there were many examples of sarcasm and since sarcasm violates the maxim of quality, or more specifically, the submaxim “Do not say what you believe to be false” (Grice, 1975, p. 46), I decided to focus on sarcasm in the third season of the show.

Neil Schaeffer writes that irony is usually considered to be “a form of communication in which the literal meaning is the opposite of, or more correctly, different from the intended meaning” (Schaeffer, 1975, p. 178). He goes on to describe irony as a “‘mask’ that the ironist at first dons only later to shed” (Schaeffer, 1975, p. 178). Irony and sarcasm are two terms that are often used

interchangeably “because there seems to be no way of differentiating reliably between the two phenomena” (Attardo et al., 2003, p. 243).

“Irony can be conceived as an extreme case of (pragmatic) ambiguity, as there are (usually two) potential interpretations of an identical wording which are mutually incompatible, and it is up to the listener to disambiguate the utterance and choose the interpretation which is contextually appropriate.” (Braun and Schmiedel, 2018, p. 112)

“The English words irony and sarcasm both originated as derogatory terms” (Lee and Katz, 1998, p. 1). Lee and Katz claim that while “irony became positively valued as a result of its association with Socrates and his methods (...) the concept of sarcasm did not achieve historical significance and positive regard” (Lee and Katz, 1998, p. 2).

Irony and sarcasm are two terms that are often used interchangeably “because there seems to be no way of differentiating reliably between the two phenomena” (Attardo et al., 2003, p. 243). The view that using sarcasm is implicating the opposite of what is actually being said is so widely accepted that it rarely comes up for debate. (Camp, 2012, p. 588)

There have been various studies on how to identify sarcasm such as the one by Roger J. Kreuz and Gina M. Caucci (2007), by Lee and Katz (1998) etc. The results of the study by Kreuz and Caucci showed “the participants had sufficient context for determining sarcastic intent in the test excerpts, and that the participants were able to distinguish between the two groups of excerpts” (Kreuz, Caucci, 2007, p. 3). There are many lexical factors “(e.g. the use of certain parts of speech, or punctuation)” (Kreuz, Caucci, 2007, p. 2) which help us determine whether a sentence is sarcastic in a text. An example of a lexical factor which might help us in determining whether a sentence was sarcastic are terms such as “gee” or “gosh” (Kreuz, Caucci, 2007, p. 2). However, when watching a movie or a TV show there are many more indicators which could help us identify sarcasm. Attardo et al. listed several multimodal markers of irony or sarcasm that have been thought of to indicate irony such as voice pitch, stress patterns, speech rate, winking, nodding and many others. (Attardo et al., 2003, pp. 244-246). They also mentioned deadpan delivery, which is “a delivery of humor/irony which consists precisely in delivering irony, sarcasm or other forms of humor without any overt marker of ironical, sarcastic, or humorous intent.” (Attardo et al., 2003, p. 244).

After having watched the third season of *Blackadder* four times, I decided to watch the season two more times to identify all the examples of sarcasm I could find. I watched the season with a transcript and wrote down all the uses of sarcasm which I recognized. While looking for examples of sarcasm I looked for multimodal markers mentioned by Attardo et al. (2003). As has already been mentioned in the chapter about the cooperative principle in *Blackadder*, the runtime of the third season (not including the intro and end credits) is 2 hours, 45 minutes, 49 seconds and I

found 73 examples of sarcasm. This means that every two minutes and 16 seconds sarcasm was used in the show. Out of the 73 times that sarcasm was used, 72 times it was used by Blackadder. Every single time that Blackadder used sarcasm he used it in a deadpan manner, or in other words, “without any overt marker of ironical, sarcastic, or humorous intent” (Attardo et al., 2003, p. 244).

There weren't any notable lexical markers of sarcasm that appeared in the third season of the show but Blackadder used phrases such as “thank you” in multiple examples of sarcasm in the third season. In the following example from the second episode of the third season, Blackadder “thanks” Baldrick for burning his novel.

**Example 18:**

**“Blackadder:** Baldrick, fetch my novel.

**Baldrick:** Novel?

**Blackadder:** Yes, the big papery thing tied up with string.

**Baldrick:** Like the thing we burnt.

**Blackadder:** Exactly.

**Baldrick:** We burnt it.

**Blackadder:** So we did. Thank you, Baldrick. Seven years of my life up in smoke.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:27:00)

Another example of Blackadder sarcastically thanking Baldrick can be found in the fifth episode of the show where Baldrick stumbles upon Blackadder who is captured and tied up.

**Example 19:**

**“Baldrick:** Morning Mr B.

**Blackadder:** Baldrick? Baldrick! Thank you for introducing me to a genuinely new experience.

**Baldrick:** What experience is that?

**Blackadder:** Being pleased to see you!” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:26:17)

Blackadder's delivery makes it hard for other characters to detect humor and most of the time they do not. The following example is from the sixth episode where Blackadder sarcastically asks Prince George whether the bed is on fire, since Prince George usually gets up late. The Prince does not understand Blackadder's sarcasm.

**Example 20:**

**“Prince George:** Ah Blackadder. Notice anything unusual?

**Blackadder:** Yes sir, it's 11:30 in the morning and you're moving about. Is the bed on fire?

**Prince George:** Well, I wouldn't know, I've been out all night.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:03:35)

The only time that Blackadder wasn't the only one using sarcasm in the third season of the show is when Wellington along with Blackadder sarcastically asked Prince George whether he went to India or China to get him his tea.

**Example 21:**

**Prince George:** Your tea, sir.

**Wellington:** You're late! Where the hell have you been for it, India?

**Blackadder:** Or Ceylon?

**Wellington:** Or China?" (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:19:41)

The fact that all of Blackadder's sarcastic quips were deadpan does not allow for an extensive analysis of multimodal markers since in Blackadder's delivery there were not examples of Blackadder changing the pitch and the tone of his voice, nor were there examples of Blackadder using overt multimodal markers of sarcasm such as winking or nodding. What can be noted, however, is the aforementioned fact that the vast majority of the sarcasm he uses is not noticed by other characters but it is noticed by the audience. The two main reasons why his sarcasm often goes unnoticed is his deadpan delivery and the fact that the other two main characters, Prince George and Baldrick, are not intelligent enough to understand it. The question that is then posed is: what makes the audience understand his sarcasm? What helps the audience understand Blackadder's sarcasm is the fact that the audience is already aware that the character of Blackadder often used sarcasm in the past such as the previous seasons of the show. With every sarcastic remark Blackadder makes, he makes it easier for the audience to understand every subsequent sarcastic remark. The fact that we know the character of Blackadder is just a part of the most important element of recognizing sarcasm, and that is context. By understanding the character of Blackadder and the situation in which he uses sarcasm, we can identify sarcasm "without any overt marker of ironical, sarcastic, or humorous intent" (Attardo et al., 2003, p. 244).

After having analyzed the examples of sarcasm in the show, I noticed that the majority of broken maxims of quality coincide with sarcasm. As has already been mentioned in a previous chapter, the maxim of quality is most frequently violated in the third season of Blackadder and it is the maxim which sets the tone for the humor in the show. Sarcasm used by Blackadder, which is the intentional breaking of the maxim of quality, and misunderstandings which arise when characters like Baldrick and Prince George unintentionally break the maxim of quality are some of the most frequently used jokes in the show. Therefore, breaking the maxim of quality is a fundamental part of the distinctive humor found in Blackadder.

## 7. Humor and the Theories of Humor

Humor is a very broad term and although sarcasm is often used for comedic purposes, it is just one of many rhetorical devices which could be used to achieve humor. Beeman describes humor as a “performative pragmatic accomplishment involving a wide range of communication skills including, but not exclusively involving, language, gesture, the presentation of visual imagery, and situation management.” (Beeman, 1999, p. 103). It “aims at creating a concrete feeling of enjoyment for an audience most commonly manifested in a physical display consisting of displays of pleasure, including smiles and laughter” (Beeman, 1999, p. 103). The term humor is “a very modern one” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4).

“Derived from the classical use of the term to refer to those peculiar or dominant elements in a person that determine their character (choleric, melancholic, phlegmatic, or sanguine), it evolved through Ben Jonson’s early 17th-century adaptation of the concept as a basis for comic characterization in terms of which an extravagant or affected emphasis on personal peculiarities made an individual subject to ridicule.” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4)

The word humor “became increasingly popular during the 18th and early 19th centuries, when it came to refer to a Romantic concept of the comic based on individual eccentricity” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). Before the connection was made “between the comic and the ‘humorous,’” texts on the subject refer to a variety of terms such as laughter, wit, comedy, raillery, jesting, scorn, ridicule, mirth, or the risible, which are used to refer to different manifestations of the phenomenon” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4).

Many theories about about humor have risen since the inception of the term. One of them is the superiority theory. The proponents of the superiority theory “concerned with this line of inquiry are interested in the object of laughter, in what, or rather who, we laugh at, in the attitudes of those who laugh, and in laughter’s good or evil, aristocratic or plebeian nature” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). Many of those writers felt that “laughter is potentially disruptive, vulgar, and even sinful and that it is therefore necessary to restrain and control it” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). In other words, the superiority theory claims that we laugh at someone else’s misfortune because it makes us feel superior. Examples which could be viewed through superiority theory are mockery, slapstick and even self deprecating humor often used by comedians. Another example of jokes which could be explained by superiority theory could be jokes that target a certain demographic such as, for examples, jokes about stereotypes of other nationalities. However, not all jokes could be explained by the superiority theory humor like, for example, wordplay or puns. Sheila Lintott claims that:

“Rather than defining humor per se, the superiority theory explains the nature and value of some humor, allows us to distinguish among the experiences of different kinds of humor,

and articulates some issues and debates concerning the ethics and etiquette of some humor.” (Lintott, 2016, p. 348)

Nevertheless, there were many writers who disagreed with the superiority theory and they could see the humor's “beneficial aspects, because it banishes sadness and boredom, puts the individual in an optimistic mood and, in general, lightens the load of everyday living” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). The people who were focused on the more positive aspects of humor studied “the Release or Relief Theory of Humor, developed mainly from the 19th century onwards” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). Herbert Spencer defined laughter as “a benevolent force that always produces equilibrium within an individual” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 10). This definition was then “taken up taken up by many authors after Spencer and treated in different ways.” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 11). Larkin-Galiñanes goes on to say that there are people who believe that relief theory is not specifically a theory of humor:

“It has been argued that Relief Theory is a theory of laughter rather than specifically a theory of humor or comedy, because all this talk of the building up and release of tension, “arousal jags,” and so on, suggests the hysterical laughter often attendant on the happy outcome of a difficult situation.” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 12)

There was another theory of humor which was interested in studying “what types of laughter are socially and morally acceptable and in studying what sort of mechanisms, apart from ridicule and derision, may be used to cause amusement” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). “This approach, known as the Incongruity Theory, shifts the perspective from the emotional angle of derision, envy and malice to a cognitive view of humor and its analysis” (Larkin-Galiñanes, 2017, p. 4). Unlike the superiority theory and the relief theory “It does not make humour dependent upon particular emotional responses like relief or feelings of superiority, and it captures the idea that the absurd is a common object of humour.” (Brown, 2005, p. 16) The Incongruity theory claims that people find joy in seeing something out of the norm, something absurd and having their expectations subverted. Unlike the aforementioned theory of superiority, the incongruity theory can explain some jokes such as puns and wordplay. An example of a joke that can be used for incongruity theory is the following: “A3: A doctor, as he left a woman's bedside, said to her husband with a shake of his head, ‘I don't like her looks.’ ‘I don't either,’ said the husband.” (Oring, 1992, p. 5)

When the husband says that he does not like the look of his life either, it is understood as not liking the physical appearance of his wife while the doctor commented on her health and therefore, the husband responded in an unexpected manner and the expectations of the person hearing the joke have been subverted. A similar joke about a doctor was used by Raskin as an example of The Semantic Script Theory of Humor and it will be talked about in the next paragraph of the thesis.



There are other linguistic theories of humor such as script-based Semantic-Script Theory of Humor, and the General Theory of Verbal Humor.

“SSTH, the first generation of the linguistic theory of humor, was a purely linguistic application of semantics to verbal jokes. OSTH, the latest, continues the enterprise on the advanced foundation of the latest theory of linguistic semantics. But the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) was an attempt of an interdisciplinary theory, including linguistics but not limited to it (Raskin, 2017, p. 109).”

Raskin used the following joke as an example of The Semantic Script Theory of Humor: “‘Is the doctor in?’ the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. ‘No,’ the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered back, ‘Come right in!’” (Raskin, 2017, p. 110)

It is a joke that Raskin took from an ordinary American joke collection of the 1930s. Raskin explains that the reason why this joke causes laughter is because the semantic script of a patient visiting a doctor has been replaced with a completely different script of a person visiting a lover (Raskin, 2017). Moreover, Raskin says that the same principle can be applied to many other jokes: “‘The first script will be strongly suggested and reinforced. But after the last sentence, it has to be rejected and replaced by the second one, for which the evidence has been surreptitiously accumulated already” (Raskin, 2017, p. 111). He provides more examples of the concept such as the joke “‘He is a man of letters: he works in the Post Office” (Raskin, 2017, p. 111).

“‘The Semantic Script Theory of Humor is hinged on the presentation of a joke as a text, at least partly, compatible with two opposing semantic scripts” (Dyner, 2011, p. 2) while “‘the General Theory of Verbal Humour centres on six hierarchically organised knowledge resources (besides script opposition, these are: language, logical mechanism, situation, target and narrative strategy)” (Dyner, 2011, p. 2).

“‘The GTVH was born out of the observation that the SSTH, despite its obvious advantages over other linguistic theories of humor, was not a complete theory. This claim was motivated by two facts. First, the SSTH does not differentiate between verbal and referential humor(...) Second, there exists a relationship of similarity among jokes, such that two jokes will be perceived as more or less similar.” (Attardo, 2017, p.127)

Attardo then goes on to mention two jokes which are more similar to each other than the joke about the doctor that Raskin used as an example:

“(1)

Q: What do you get when you cross a cow and a lawnmower?

A: A lawnmooer.

(2)

Q: What do you get when you cross a lemon and a cat?

A: A sourpuss.” (Attardo, 2017, p.127)

Attardo then mentions that the “main claim of the GTVH is that jokes may resemble each other along the lines of six parameters.” (Attardo, 2017, p.127)

### 7.1. Theories of Humor in Blackadder

In the previous chapters about the cooperative principle, Blackadder's humor has been analyzed through violations of Grice's maxims and the use of sarcasm. This chapter aims to look at the TV show through the points of view of already mentioned theories of humor such as the superiority and incongruity theory. After having watched the show six times, I watched it two more times to try to find examples which could be explained through the aforementioned theories of humor and to identify which theory Blackadder most often adheres to. There are numerous examples where the superiority theory can be applied in the third season of Blackadder. There are many examples of derisive humor in the third season of the series, especially by the character of Blackadder towards other characters. The character he insults the most is the character of Baldrick, most of the time ridiculing Baldrick's intelligence and his lack of hygiene. In the following example from the third episode of the third season, Blackadder makes fun of Baldrick for never changing his trousers.

#### Example 21:

“**Blackadder:** Baldrick, when did you last change your trousers

**Baldrick:** I have never changed my trousers.

**Blackadder:** Thank you. You see, the ancient Greeks, Sir, wrote in legend of a terrible container in which all the evils of the world were trapped. How prophetic they were. All they got wrong was the name. They called it "Pandora's Box," when, of course, they meant ‘Baldrick's Trousers.’”

(Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:07:57)

Besides the insults which are very frequent in the third season of Blackadder, the superiority theory can be applied when Baldrick mixes up two similar sounding words and shows us his lack of intelligence and therefore making the audience laugh because the audience feels much more intelligent than Baldrick. The following example is from the first episode where Baldrick is talking to Mrs. Miggins about who has the right to vote and Baldrick mistakes the term 'boat' for the term 'vote'.

#### Example 22:

“**Blackadder:** Well of course you didn't; you're not eligible to vote.

**Mrs. Miggins:** Well, why not?

**Blackadder:** Because virtually no one is: women, peasants, chimpanzees lunatics, Lords...

**Baldrick:** That's not true, Lord Nelson's got a vote!

**Blackadder:** He's got a boat, Baldrick.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:00:56)

Another example of Baldrick confusing two terms for each other can be seen in the fifth episode of the season where Blackadder mistakes the term 'concubine' with 'porcupine'.

**Example 23:**

“**Blackadder:** Pah! I laugh in the face of danger. I drop ice cubes down the vest of fear. Things couldn't be better Baldrick. She'll get me abroad and make me rich, then I'll probably drop her and get two hundred concubines to share my bed.

**Baldrick:** Won't they be rather prickly?

**Edmund:** Concubines Baldrick, not porcupines.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:23:41)

There are many other examples with Baldrick confusing two terms and it is played for laughs and such as him confusing the term 'novel' with 'navel' and the term 'magnum opus' with the term 'octopus'.

There is also slapstick in the third season which would reinforce the superiority theory which claims that we laugh at misfortune of other people or the so called Schadenfreude. There are multiple moments throughout the season where Blackadder slaps Baldrick on the back of his head or twists his nose. The most notable example of slapstick is from the sixth episode where Blackadder and Lord Nelson take turns punching Prince George in the face. It is played as a humorous situation and the superiority theory could explain it as laughing at Prince George because we are glad that we are not in his situation.

**Example 24:**

“**Blackadder:** Aah, I think you hit him very hard.

**Wellington:** Nonsense, a hard hit would be like that! (Wellington hits the Prince) I only hit him like that. (Wellington hits the Prince again)

**Blackadder:** No sir, a soft hit would be like this. (Blackadder hits the Prince) Whereas you hit him like this. (Blackadder hits the Prince once more)” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:15:57)

Although superiority theory can be used to explain many jokes found in Blackadder, the puns and wordplay cannot be explained by it. However, incongruity theory can be applied to those types of jokes. The following example is from the second episode of the season and it shows Blackadder requesting 'Two slices of bread with something in between.'

**Example 25:**

“**Blackadder:** Now; Baldrick, go to the kitchen and make me something quick and simple to eat, would you? Two slices of bread with something in between.

**Baldrick:** What, like Gerald, Lord Sandwich, had the other day?

**Blackadder:** Yes, a few rounds of Geralders.” (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:19:33)

In the show, Blackadder is a contemporary of Lord Gerald Sandwich after whom the sandwich got its name. However, instead of calling two slices of bread with something in between 'a sandwich' (after Lord Gerald Sandwich's last name as it is known today), he calls them Geralders and subverts the audience's expectations.

There are also examples of absurdism in the third season which is one of the things which makes us laugh according to the incongruity theory. In the second episode of the season, Blackadder falls asleep and we see a dream of his where his aunt shows up, Baldrick turns into an Alsatian and Doctor Johnson forgives Blackadder for burning his dictionary. The absurdity of a situation which would never happen in reality is what makes us laugh according to the incongruity theory.

There are also various jokes in the show which can be explained by both the superiority and relief theory. In the following example from the fifth episode of the season, Blackadder asks Baldrick if he knows what irony is and Baldrick answers "it's like goldy and bronzy, only it's made of iron."

**Example 26:**

**Blackadder:** No, I'm auditioning for the part of Arnold the Bat in Sheridan's new comedy.

**Baldrick:** Oh, that's all right then.

**Blackadder:** Baldrick, have you no idea what irony is?

**Baldrick:** Yeah, it's like goldy and bronzy, only it's made of iron.

**Blackadder:** Never mind, never mind, just saddle the Prince's horse." (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:17:56)

According to the superiority theory, the audience laughs at Baldrick because he shows his lack of intelligence and the audience feels superior to him, while according to the incongruity theory, the audience finds the joke funny because of the wordplay and because Baldrick subverted the audience's expectations by connecting irony to iron (metal).

Another case of wordplay can be found in the same episode of the season where Blackadder is sent by the Prince to ask the father of Amy Hardwood for her hand in marriage and Mr. Hardwood misunderstands Blackadder's phrase.

**Example 27:**

**Blackadder:** Sir, I come as emissary of the Prince of Wales with the most splendid news. He wants your daughter Amy for his wife.

**Mr. Hardwood:** Well his wife can't have her! Outrageous, sir, to come here with such a suggestion! Why, sir, or I shall take off my belt and by thunder me trousers will fall down!

**Blackadder:** No sir. Sir, you misunderstand. He wants to marry your lovely daughter." (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:15:54)

This joke could also be looked through Raskin's semantic script theory of humor. The first script is where Blackadder tells Mr. Hardwood that Prince George wants to marry Amy Hardwood and then it is reversed by Mr. Hardwood who misunderstands Blackadder and thinks that Prince George wants his wife to have Amy, although in the Semantic Script theory, it is important that the scripts are the opposite of each other.

Another joke that could be viewed through Raskin's semantic script theory is in the first episode where Blackadder says that the parliament wants to strike Prince George from the civil list. Prince George says that he heard the public sang in the streets 'We hail Prince George! We hail Prince George!' while Blackadder answers that what they really said was 'We \*hate\* Prince George', sir. 'We \*hate\* Prince George!' In this examples the script of the people who love Prince George is reversed with the people who hate Prince George.

**Example 28:**

**Blackadder:** Sir, if this bill goes through, you won't have any socks.

**Prince George:** Well, I haven't got any socks at the moment!

**Blackadder:**...or trousers, shirts, waistcoats, or pantaloons. They're going to bankrupt you.

**Prince George:** Well, they can't do that. Why, the public love me! Only the other day, I was out in the street and they sang, 'We hail Prince George! We hail Prince George!'

**Blackadder:** 'We \*hate\* Prince George', sir. 'We \*hate\* Prince George!'" (Fletcher, Elton and Curtis, 1987, 0:04:54)

The script of the people who love Prince George is reversed with the people who hate Prince George and therefore the reversal of the scripts makes the audience laugh.

In conclusion, even though there are many examples of absurdity which is related to the incongruity theory, Blackadder's use of sarcasm and derisive humor can be seen as indicative of the show's reliance on the superiority theory of humor. As has already been mentioned, this theory suggests that humor arises from a sense of superiority, which is shown through wit, cleverness, or knowledge. There are many examples of characters showing their simple-mindedness and, in the process, the audience feels superior to them which is arguably the main source of humor in the third season of Blackadder.

## **8. Conclusion**

One of the aims of this study was to analyze how the cooperative principle can be related to humor in one of the most popular British sitcoms of all time and how each of the four Grice's maxims are broken in Blackadder. This study has shown that in almost every exchange between the characters, there is at least one maxim that is broken and very often there is more than one maxim

broken at the same time. The maxim which is violated the most is the maxim of quality and it is violated 90 times, the maxim of manner is violated 71 times, the maxim of quantity is violated 29 times and, finally, the maxim of relation is violated 20 times in the third season of Blackadder. All of the maxims seem to be broken for comedic effect with one of the notable exceptions being the maxim of quality, which is sometimes not broken for comedic effect when the characters are simply lying to get out of a bad situation. Edmund Blackadder is the character who violates the maxims the most which is to be expected since he is the principal character in the show and appears in almost every scene in the third season.

Another goal of the study was to analyze sarcasm in the third season of Blackadder and to see whether there were any notable multimodal markers of sarcasm. The results showed that out of the 73 times that sarcasm was used, 72 times it was used by Blackadder and all of the instances of sarcasm were deadpan, without any overt multimodal markers. Another notable result is that, most of the time, other characters do not understand Blackadder's sarcasm while the audience is expected to understand it. The deadpan delivery of sarcasm by Blackadder clearly shows that it is possible to understand sarcasm even without any obvious multimodal markers and that context is the most important part of understanding sarcasm. Furthermore, the amount of jokes where Blackadder is being sarcastic and intentionally breaks the maxim of quality combined with jokes where Baldrick or Prince George unintentionally break the maxim of quality shows us that the violation of the maxim of quality is one of the fundamental parts of the show's humor.

Finally, I analyzed the third season of the show through popular theories of humor such as the superiority theory and incongruity theory. The third season of the show could be viewed through all of the aforementioned theories although the theory of humor on which the third season of Blackadder relies the most is the superiority theory since the third season of the show is abundant with derisive humor, sarcasm and slapstick. It is important to notice that the superiority theory cannot explain all the jokes found in the show and some of the jokes can be explained by other theories of humor.

It is very important to accentuate the fact that all of the data gathered was from the third season of the show and that the results may vary drastically if other seasons of the show were taken into account since every show changes the setting, characters and even the personality of the main character Blackadder.

Due to how often each of the maxims is broken during the third season of Blackadder, analyzing humor in TV shows through the cooperative principle is definitely a viable method of analysis and it can give a person a better understanding of how and why certain situations produce the reaction of laughter in the audience. Besides the cooperative principle, theories of humor, such

as the superiority theory and incongruity theory, give further insight into what could be the reason behind what makes a situation funny.

Violating Grice's maxims in real-life conversations can lead to misunderstandings or confusion, which can often be resolved in a humorous way. The humor derived from these situations in *Blackadder* is understandably exaggerated for comedic effect. In essence, *Blackadder's* use of linguistic techniques, such as the violation of Grice's maxims and the use of sarcasm shows the craft of the writers and their mastery of language which has engaged and entertained the audience for decades.

## 9. Literature

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