

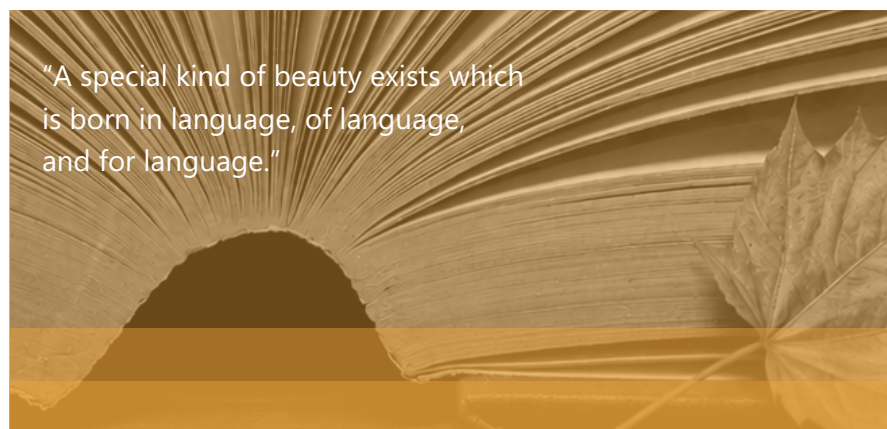


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"A special kind of beauty exists which
is born in language, of language,
and for language."



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Presupposition and implicature as humor-generating mechanisms in discourse

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Annotation *This article examines presupposition and conversational implicature as interrelated pragmatic mechanisms involved in the production and interpretation of humorous discourse. Humor often relies not on the literal meaning of an utterance but on meanings inferred from context, shared knowledge, communicative expectations, and manipulated assumptions. Presupposition is viewed as backgrounded information treated as already accepted or recoverable, while implicature refers to contextually inferred meaning beyond what is explicitly stated. The study argues that humorous effects frequently emerge from the interaction between these two levels of implicit meaning, particularly through unexpected presuppositions, cancelled inferences, flouting of conversational expectations, and reinterpretation of prior assumptions. Drawing on Gricean pragmatics, relevance-oriented approaches, and research on verbal humor, the article considers presupposition triggers, maxim flouting, scalar and particularized implicatures, irony, ambiguity, and inferential reversal. The analysis shows that humor is an inferential phenomenon shaped by linguistic form, contextual knowledge, and the recipient's recognition of a non-literal communicative frame.*

Keywords *Humorous discourse, presupposition, conversational implicature, pragmatic inference, verbal humor, contextual interpretation*

Presuppozitsiya va implikatura - yumoristik diskursni yuzaga keltiruvchi pragmatik mexanizmlar sifatida

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Annotatsiya *Ushbu maqolada presuppozitsiya va konversatsion implikatura yumoristik diskursni yaratish va talqin qilishda o'zaro bog'liq pragmatik mexanizmlar sifatida tadqiq etiladi. Yumor ko'pincha gapning bevosita lug'aviy ma'nosiga emas, balki kontekst, umumiy bilimlar, kommunikativ kutilmalar va ataylab o'zgartirilgan taxminlar asosida anglashiladigan ma'nolarga tayanadi. Presuppozitsiya avvaldan qabul qilingan yoki kontekstdan tiklanadigan fon axboroti sifatida, implikatura esa bevosita ifodalanmagan, biroq kontekst asosida anglashiladigan ma'no sifatida talqin qilinadi. Tadqiqotda yumoristik effekt ushbu ikki yashirin ma'no darajasining o'zaro ta'siri, xususan, kutilmagan presuppozitsiyalar, bekor qilinadigan xulosalar, kommunikativ kutilmalarning buzilishi va oldingi taxminlarning qayta talqin qilinishi orqali yuzaga kelishi asoslanadi. Grays pragmatikasi, relevansga asoslangan yondashuvlar va verbal yumor tadqiqotlariga tayangan holda*

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presuppozitsiya triggerlari, kommunikativ maksimlarning buzilishi, skalyar va xususiy implikaturalar, ironiya, ko'pma'nolilik hamda inferensial o'zgarish tahlil qilinadi. Natijalar yumorning lingvistik shakl, kontekstual bilim va noliteral kommunikativ ma'noni anglash jarayoniga asoslangan inferensial hodisa ekanini ko'rsatadi.

Kalit so'zlar *Yumoristik diskurs, presuppozitsiya, konversatsion implikatura, pragmatik inferensiya, verbal humor, kontekstual talqin*

Пресуппозиция и импликатура как прагматические механизмы порождения юмористического дискурса

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Аннотация *В статье рассматриваются пресуппозиция и разговорная импликатура как взаимосвязанные прагматические механизмы, участвующие в создании и интерпретации юмористического дискурса. Юмор часто основывается не на буквальном значении высказывания, а на смыслах, выводимых из контекста, общих знаний, коммуникативных ожиданий и намеренно изменённых предположений. Пресуппозиция понимается как фоновая информация, представленная как уже известная или восстанавливаемая, тогда как импликатура представляет собой контекстуально выводимый смысл, выходящий за пределы эксплицитно выраженного содержания. Утверждается, что юмористический эффект часто возникает в результате взаимодействия этих двух уровней имплицитного значения, в частности посредством неожиданных пресуппозиций, отмены первоначальных выводов, нарушения коммуникативных ожиданий и переосмысления исходных предположений. На основе прагматики Грайса, релевантных подходов и исследований вербального юмора анализируются триггеры пресуппозиции, нарушение коммуникативных максим, скалярные и частные импликатуры, ирония, неоднозначность и инференциальная переинтерпретация. Анализ показывает, что юмор представляет собой инференциальное явление, формируемое взаимодействием языковой формы, контекстуальных знаний и способности адресата распознавать небуквальный коммуникативный смысл.*

Ключевые слова *Юмористический дискурс, пресуппозиция, разговорная импликатура, прагматическая инференция, вербальный юмор, контекстуальная интерпретация*

Introduction

Humorous discourse is a particularly revealing domain for pragmatic inquiry because its interpretation routinely exceeds the information encoded in linguistic form. A humorous utterance may be grammatically transparent and lexically ordinary, yet its intended effect can remain inaccessible unless the recipient reconstructs assumptions that are not directly stated. This inferential dependence makes humor a productive field for examining the relation between semantics, pragmatics, discourse context, and shared cultural knowledge. In conversational humor, irony, teasing, witty retorts, anecdotes, and other forms of verbal play, speakers frequently communicate on two levels at once: the explicit proposition and an implicit layer whose recognition is essential to the humorous effect. Dynel (2009) accordingly treats conversational humor as a broad category encompassing multiple semantic-pragmatic forms rather than reducing verbal humor to the conventional joke alone.

Among the pragmatic phenomena that organize implicit meaning, presupposition and implicature occupy a central position. Presuppositions allow speakers to package information as backgrounded, taken for granted, or mutually accessible. Conversational implicatures, by contrast, arise when recipients infer communicative intentions by relating what is said to contextual expectations concerning relevance, informativeness, truthfulness, and manner. Grice's (1975) account of conversational cooperation remains foundational because it explains how hearers move from literal content to intended but unstated meaning. In humorous interaction, however, this inferential machinery is often deliberately manipulated. Speakers may exploit a presupposition that is absurd, socially delicate, or unexpectedly revealing; they may also ostentatiously flout a conversational

maxim so that the hearer searches for a non-literal interpretation.

The significance of these mechanisms becomes especially evident when humor is understood as an inferential event rather than a property of isolated words or sentences. Raskin and Attardo (1994) describe humor as compatible with a special non-bona-fide mode of communication in which literal truth orientation may be temporarily suspended without eliminating cooperation altogether. Similarly, relevance-oriented approaches emphasize that humorous communication depends on the addressee's inferential processing and on the speaker's strategic management of contextual assumptions (Yus, 2016). The recipient is therefore not a passive decoder but an active participant who detects a discrepancy, searches for a contextually plausible alternative interpretation, and recognizes that the interpretive shift itself is intended to be amusing.

The purpose of this article is to investigate how presupposition and conversational implicature function as humor-generating mechanisms in discourse. The study has four objectives: to clarify the pragmatic status of presupposition and implicature in humorous communication; to identify recurrent ways in which they are manipulated for humorous effect; to explain their interaction with incongruity, irony, ambiguity, and contextual reinterpretation; and to propose a functional model showing how implicit meaning contributes to the transition from a serious interpretive frame to a humorous one. The analysis is qualitative and theory-driven. Illustrative examples are constructed to isolate specific mechanisms, while the discussion is grounded in established pragmatic and humor-linguistic scholarship.

Presupposition as backgrounded meaning in humorous discourse

Presupposition concerns information that a speaker presents as already accepted,

identifiable, or recoverable for the purposes of an utterance. In classical pragmatic description, presuppositions are associated with linguistic triggers such as definite descriptions, factive verbs, change-of-state verbs, iterative expressions, cleft constructions, temporal clauses, and certain lexical items (Levinson, 1983; Yule, 1996). The utterance "John stopped complaining," for instance, conventionally presents John's prior complaining as background information. Unlike an assertion, which places information in the foreground and makes it directly negotiable, a presupposition often enters discourse less conspicuously. This backgrounded status is precisely what makes presupposition productive in humor: a speaker can smuggle an unexpected assumption into the common ground and invite the recipient to notice its incongruity.

A first humor-generating pattern may be termed absurd presupposition. Consider the illustrative exchange: "When did you stop giving your computer emotional support?" The question presupposes that the addressee previously gave the computer emotional support. If no such practice exists, the humor does not arise from the interrogative content alone but from the anomalous assumption embedded within it. The recipient is momentarily positioned inside an invented world in which an absurd behavior is treated as established fact. The incongruity between the presupposed proposition and ordinary expectations creates the humorous effect. This strategy is common in teasing because it allows a speaker to characterize another person indirectly while maintaining a playful frame.

A second pattern involves evaluative presupposition. Expressions such as "even," "again," "still," "finally," and "too" can encode or activate assumptions about expectations, repetition, or prior states. An utterance such as "You finally arrived before the meeting ended" asserts an arrival but also presupposes or conventionally signals a history of lateness and an expectation that punctuality is unusual.

In a humorous context, the backgrounded evaluation may be more important than the asserted proposition. The humor emerges because criticism is displaced from explicit assertion into an implicit layer. This allows speakers to perform delicate interpersonal work: they can tease, criticize, or display familiarity while preserving plausible deniability and a non-serious interactional key.

Presupposition can also generate humor through accommodation. Accommodation occurs when the recipient accepts, at least provisionally, a presupposed proposition that was not previously part of the common ground. Humorous discourse frequently abuses this normal pragmatic process by requiring the hearer to accommodate an assumption that is exaggerated, impossible, or socially unexpected. For example, "Which of your three personalities is answering the email today?" invites accommodation of the playful proposition that the addressee has multiple contrasting personas. The utterance becomes humorous when the recipient recognizes that the presupposition is not a sincere diagnostic claim but a figurative commentary on inconsistent behavior. The interpretation therefore depends on both the linguistic trigger and recognition of the humorous frame.

Another important feature is presupposition persistence. Presupposed content often survives under negation, questioning, and modalization more readily than asserted content. This relative projection can be exploited humorously because a speaker may deny an accusation while leaving its comic premise intact. Compare "I am not saying your cooking is dangerous; I am only saying the smoke alarm deserves overtime." The first clause explicitly rejects a negative characterization, yet the second clause constructs an inferential environment in which poor cooking is strongly presupposed or implied. Humor arises from the contradiction between surface denial and background commitment. Such patterns demonstrate that the organization of information into

foreground and background is itself a resource for comic meaning.

Conversational implicature and the humorous exploitation of cooperation

Grice (1975) proposes that ordinary conversation is guided by a Cooperative Principle and by expectations commonly formulated as the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Speakers are expected, broadly, to provide an appropriate amount of information, avoid saying what they believe to be false or unsupported, remain relevant, and communicate with sufficient clarity. Crucially, apparent violations do not automatically terminate cooperation. When a maxim is conspicuously flouted, the hearer may assume that the speaker remains communicatively rational and search for an additional meaning capable of explaining the deviation. The resulting inference is a conversational implicature.

Humor makes systematic use of this inferential logic. A speaker can deliberately produce an utterance that is obviously too weak, too strong, irrelevant, false, or obscure at the literal level, thereby prompting the hearer to reconstruct a second-order intention. Consider the question "How was the conference presentation?" followed by the response "The slides had excellent transitions." If the presentation as a whole is the relevant topic, praise restricted to slide transitions is conspicuously under-informative. The hearer can infer that the speaker found little else worth praising. The humorous force comes from the contrast between the formally positive statement and the negative implicature recovered through quantity and relevance expectations.

The maxim of Quality is especially productive in irony and hyperbole. An utterance such as "Wonderful weather!" spoken during a violent downpour is literally inconsistent with observable circumstances. Because the falsity is manifest, the recipient does not normally interpret the statement as deception. Instead, the obvious mismatch

signals a non-literal intention, often ironic. Attardo (2000) characterizes irony in terms of relevant inappropriateness, emphasizing that an apparently unsuitable utterance can nevertheless be communicatively relevant at another interpretive level. In humorous discourse, this inferential reversal can be intensified by exaggeration, understatement, or echoic reference to a prior expectation.

Flouting Relation can generate humor through strategically conspicuous irrelevance. Suppose one participant asks, "Did you finish the report?" and the other answers, "The coffee machine and I have been through a lot today." The response does not directly answer the question, but its very irrelevance encourages inference. The recipient may conclude that the report is unfinished and that the speaker is humorously presenting coffee consumption as evidence of struggle. The humorous interpretation depends on constructing a bridge between the apparently unrelated response and the communicative problem under discussion.

Manner-based humor often exploits ambiguity, excessive complexity, euphemism, or deliberate obscurity. A speaker who says "I am currently exploring alternative relationships with deadlines" instead of "I am late" uses an unnecessarily elaborate formulation. The circumlocution invites the hearer to infer that the speaker is avoiding a direct admission. The comic effect is generated by the disproportion between a simple reality and an inflated linguistic representation. Such examples illustrate that humor can emerge not only from what is communicated but from the marked way in which it is communicated.

Scalar, particularized, and cancelled implicatures in humor

Conversational implicatures differ in their dependence on context. Generalized implicatures can arise relatively regularly from particular expressions, while particularized implicatures require a specific contextual configuration (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983). Humor can exploit both types. Scalar

implicatures are especially useful because lexical choices such as *some*, *many*, *possible*, or *warm* activate ordered alternatives. If a speaker says "Some of the students understood my explanation" in a context where all students were expected to understand, the conventional pragmatic inference is that not all did. A humorous continuation – "The rest are forming a support group" – can strengthen the initially understated implication and transform pedagogical disappointment into comic self-evaluation.

Particularized implicatures offer even greater flexibility because their interpretation depends on shared situational knowledge. Imagine two colleagues looking at a desk covered by documents. One asks, "Are you busy?" and the other replies, "No, I collect deadlines recreationally." Nothing in the lexical semantics of "collect deadlines" directly means "I am extremely busy." The interpretation becomes available only through the visible context and the culturally familiar association between deadlines and workload. Humor arises when the recipient integrates the literal impossibility of recreational deadline collecting with the contextually obvious intended meaning.

A further humorous resource is implicature cancellation. Conversational implicatures are characteristically defeasible: subsequent information can cancel an inference without producing strict logical contradiction. Humor can exploit the temporal structure of this process. A speaker may guide the recipient toward one inference and then overturn it in a final phrase. For example: "I have started exercising every morning – my thumb gets an excellent workout scrolling through fitness videos." The first clause encourages an inference of physical exercise. The continuation cancels that interpretation and replaces it with a less admirable but contextually coherent meaning. The comic effect is located in the recipient's forced revision of an inference that had seemed reasonable a moment earlier.

This inferential reversal is closely related to incongruity-resolution accounts of humor. The first segment of a humorous utterance activates a preferred interpretation; later information reveals that the initial frame is inadequate and requires reinterpretation. Yus (2016) argues that relevance-theoretic humor analysis can account for such processing in terms of expectations, contextual accessibility, and inferential effort. Presupposition and implicature contribute to this mechanism because they guide the recipient toward assumptions that may later prove strategically misleading. Humor thus involves not merely discovering an unexpected meaning but recognizing that one's own inferential path has been anticipated and manipulated by the speaker.

The interaction of presupposition and implicature

Presupposition and implicature should not be treated as isolated mechanisms in humorous discourse. In many cases they operate simultaneously. A presupposition establishes a background assumption, while an implicature evaluates, extends, or destabilizes that assumption. Consider the constructed utterance "Even my alarm clock has stopped believing in me." The focus particle "even" introduces a scale on which the alarm clock is an unexpectedly low candidate for possessing an attitude toward the speaker, while the proposition also invites the implication that the speaker habitually fails to wake up or meet obligations. The absurd anthropomorphic presupposition and the self-deprecating implicature jointly produce the humorous effect.

The interaction can be represented as a sequence of pragmatic operations. First, the linguistic form activates an explicit proposition and one or more presupposed assumptions. Second, the recipient compares these assumptions with contextual knowledge and conversational expectations. Third, a mismatch or marked choice triggers a search for an implicated interpretation. Fourth, the hearer

identifies a plausible communicative intention – teasing, irony, self-deprecation, criticism, solidarity, or playful exaggeration. Finally, the recognition that the mismatch was deliberately designed produces or supports the humorous effect. This sequence is not necessarily conscious or temporally slow; in familiar contexts it may occur almost instantaneously.

This model also explains why the same utterance can be humorous in one context and offensive, confusing, or entirely non-humorous in another. Implicit meaning relies on shared assumptions, and those assumptions are socially and culturally distributed. A presupposition intended as playful may be rejected if the hearer does not accept the background premise. An ironic implicature may fail if the literal statement is not obviously incompatible with contextual knowledge. Humor therefore requires a sufficient degree of common ground regarding both the subject matter and the communicative frame. The linguistic mechanism alone cannot guarantee humorous uptake.

The cultural dimension is particularly important. Presupposed knowledge may concern social roles, institutions, stereotypes, popular culture, conventional scripts, or norms of politeness. Similarly, implicatures are calculated against expectations about what counts as informative, relevant, appropriate, or face-sensitive in a given community. Consequently, humorous discourse provides evidence not only about individual creativity but also about culturally available interpretive resources. What a community can leave unsaid – and still expect recipients to infer – reveals shared pragmatic and cultural knowledge.

Pragmatic functions of presupposition- and implicature-based humor

The pragmatic value of implicit humor extends beyond amusement. First, it can mitigate criticism. By embedding a negative evaluation in a presupposition or implicature, speakers avoid fully explicit confrontation. "You

are brave to call that a haircut" can communicate a negative judgment while formally foregrounding courage. The humorous frame may soften the criticism, although its success depends on interpersonal relations and contextual sensitivity.

Second, implicit humor can construct solidarity. Shared recognition of an implicature confirms that participants possess common knowledge and compatible interpretive expectations. When a hearer successfully reconstructs a playful inference, the interaction can produce a sense of alignment: both parties understand not only the words but the unstated social meaning. This explains why inside jokes and context-dependent humorous remarks can function as markers of group membership.

Third, presupposition and implicature support face management. Speakers can communicate evaluations indirectly, allowing room for retreat if the utterance is poorly received. At the same time, indirectness does not automatically make an utterance polite. Teasing and jocular mockery may contain face-threatening content, but the humorous frame can reclassify the act as affiliative rather than hostile. Dynel's (2009) discussion of teasing emphasizes that apparent aggression can be non-genuine and embedded in a mutually recognized humorous mode.

Fourth, these mechanisms enable self-presentation. Self-deprecating humor often relies on implicatures that invite the audience to infer a negative characterization without requiring a literal confession. "My organizational system is very advanced; even I cannot find anything" humorously implies disorganization through contradiction between the positive evaluation and its consequence. Such discourse can display wit, reduce social distance, and pre-empt criticism by making the speaker the first evaluator of his or her own shortcomings.

Finally, implicit humor can perform metapragmatic work by drawing attention to the norms of communication themselves. A

deliberately uninformative answer, exaggerated politeness, or absurdly formal phrasing can parody conversational conventions. In such cases, the humor is not merely about the topic but about how people are expected to speak. The recipient recognizes a deviation from a norm and simultaneously recognizes that the deviation is intentional. This double awareness is central to pragmatic humor.

A functional classification of humor-generating strategies

On the basis of the preceding discussion, presupposition- and implicature-based humor can be organized into several recurrent functional strategies. The first is presuppositional incongruity, in which a background assumption is absurd, exaggerated, socially marked, or unexpectedly evaluative. The second is presuppositional accommodation for comic characterization, where the hearer is invited to provisionally accept an invented premise about a person or situation. The third is maxim flouting, where an obviously non-literal, irrelevant, under-informative, over-informative, or obscure utterance prompts the recovery of a humorous implicature.

The fourth strategy is inferential misdirection. Here the speaker encourages an initially salient interpretation and later supplies information that forces reinterpretation. The fifth is scalar understatement or overstatement, in which the selected expression activates stronger or weaker alternatives and allows the recipient to infer an evaluation. The sixth is ironic reversal, where manifest discrepancy between literal wording and contextual reality generates an opposite or critically distanced interpretation. The seventh is implicit evaluation, in which criticism, praise, or social judgment is communicated primarily through background assumptions and inference rather than explicit assertion.

These categories are analytical rather than mutually exclusive. A single humorous utterance may simultaneously contain a

presupposition trigger, flout a maxim, activate an ironic reading, and require contextual reinterpretation. This overlap is consistent with broader research on conversational humor, where categories frequently intersect rather than forming a rigid taxonomy (Dynel, 2009). The value of the classification lies in identifying which inferential operations are most responsible for the humorous effect in a particular discourse event.

Implications for discourse analysis and pragmatic competence

The analysis of implicit humor has methodological implications for discourse studies. Researchers should avoid treating humorous meaning as self-evident or locating it solely in lexical markers. A rigorous analysis needs to distinguish at least four levels: what is explicitly said; what is presupposed; what is implicated; and what contextual evidence licenses the humorous interpretation. This layered approach makes it possible to explain why apparently similar linguistic forms can perform different functions across discourse situations.

The distinction is also relevant to pragmatic competence. Understanding vocabulary and grammar does not guarantee successful interpretation of humor. Language users must identify presupposed information, recognize when conversational expectations are being deliberately flouted, infer unstated evaluations, and determine whether an apparent violation belongs to a humorous rather than hostile or deceptive frame. These abilities are especially important in intercultural communication, where participants may not share the same assumptions about irony, teasing, indirectness, or acceptable topics of humor.

For language teaching, this suggests that pragmatic instruction can benefit from carefully contextualized humorous material. Learners can be asked to identify the literal proposition, presupposition triggers, violated or flouted maxims, inferred meanings, and contextual assumptions required for interpretation.

Such tasks shift attention from merely "understanding the joke" to understanding the inferential architecture that makes the joke or humorous remark possible. They also encourage sensitivity to the fact that humor is culturally and relationally situated and should not be generalized mechanically across communicative communities.

Conclusion

Presupposition and conversational implicature constitute fundamental mechanisms in the organization of humorous discourse because both enable speakers to communicate meanings that exceed explicit linguistic content. Presupposition establishes background assumptions and can generate humor when those assumptions are unexpected, exaggerated, evaluative, or absurd. Implicature allows recipients to infer non-literal intentions from conspicuous departures from conversational expectations. When these mechanisms interact, humorous meaning emerges through a dynamic process of expectation, inference, incongruity, and reinterpretation.

The analysis has shown that maxim flouting, presuppositional incongruity, scalar

inference, contextual bridging, irony, accommodation, and implicature cancellation are recurrent resources for humorous meaning construction. Their operation confirms that humor is not reducible to semantic ambiguity or stylistic ornamentation. It is a pragmatic achievement dependent on common ground, contextual accessibility, communicative intention, and the recipient's willingness and ability to infer a playful frame.

From a broader linguistic perspective, humorous discourse demonstrates the explanatory importance of implicit meaning. It reveals how speakers strategically manipulate what is treated as given, what is left unsaid, and what the hearer is expected to infer. Future research may extend this framework through corpus-based comparison of discourse domains, cross-cultural analysis of presuppositional and implicatural humor, and empirical investigation of how different groups recognize, negotiate, or reject humorous inferences. Such work can contribute to pragmatics, discourse analysis, linguoculturology, translation studies, and the study of communicative competence.

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