

## Humor and its Creation through Disrupted Schemata in the TV Show “The Office”; A Cognitive Stylistic Analysis

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### Abstract

*Humor and its creation are always a point of intrigue in the field of language, whether it is text or discourse. Throughout time, different techniques have been developed and used by those narrating and writing to create that humor. This research explores humor through the lens of cognitive stylistics and the theory of Disrupted Schemata by Agnes Marszalek (2012). Disrupted Schemata talks about the creation of humorous worlds and comic narratives. The current study analyzes the famous tv sitcom “The Office” and the creation of incongruous and humorous narratives in it through the disruption of objects, settings, scenes, and characters as it disrupts the background knowledge or schema of the viewer creating comicality or absurdity in the show. It aims to look into how language and specifically humor is created and perceived on the screen through language, schema and its disruption. Consequently, it is cognitive stylistics that explores the usage of language and how it is comprehended based on the reader, listener and viewer’s beliefs, knowledge and inferences. The study shows that it is the disruption of one’s schema about the world that creates humor through absurdity and incongruity displayed in the series.*

**Keywords:** Disrupted Schemata, Humor and Incongruity, Cognitive Stylistics, Background Knowledge, Schema.

### Introduction

Humor – a quality in any discourse(text) written or oral, formal or informal has the ability to cause hilarity and amusement either through a conscious physical or verbal utterance or an unconscious act. It exists all around us, with some having more observance towards it than others. Humor is created through many modes; local jokes, verbal, physical humor, figures of speech – irony, exaggeration, construction of humorous structures, humorous narrative, disruption methods etc. “Humor is affective absurdity” (Amberg 89). It is a core element of any language and has a very close connection to a man’s psychology, and the society he resides in as the language (formal or informal) used by the members of the society. Humor and its comprehension depend on many factors, predominantly on one’s background knowledge where context plays a huge part in the reader’s interpretation of it.

Cognitive stylistics is a field that analyzes texts both in discourse and from the framework of linguistic theories but extends to cognitive approaches. It incorporates not only the text but the mind’s contribution to reading, listening or watching. It is cognitive stylistics that explores the usage of language and how it is comprehended based on the reader’s beliefs, knowledge and inferences; by combing stylistics and psychology where the linguistic effect on literary text is analyzed through a cognitive approach. The reader, listener and viewer’s own schematic knowledge of something affects his comprehension of literary texts, scripts or visuals and similar is the case with humor.

Schema is the “well integrated chunks of knowledge about the world, events, people and actions” (Eyesecken, Keanne 34). Schema Theory has been used to account for how people comprehend, learn from and remember meanings in texts. However, incongruity and humor can be constructed by disrupting said schemata, and creating a narrative world with elements such as disrupted situations, characters, settings, and objects that accounts for a comic effect on the reader based on his background knowledge of the situations, characters, settings and objects.

The current research is using the cognitive stylistic approach. It is an extension of analysis of literary texts, scripts, visuals with the help of linguistic/stylistic theories, but it goes beyond the linguistic boundaries and towards cognitive sciences. It is an approach that keeps evolving itself and presents researchers with new approaches to put literary texts under the lens of. The idea of a humorous narrative context, and the creation of humor stress the significance of context in processing the contents – be it textual, or visual. And context is knowledge dependent in the case of schema theory. That context can be of four things, whether the knowledge of the real world; the knowledge regarding the textual structures generally; the context based on the knowledge that is built in the fictional world; and lastly the stylistic structures of the creator’s style or the specific text used particularly for that narrative. Here the methods of disruption in the schema theory - “Disrupted settings; Disrupted Objects; Disrupted Situations; Disrupted Characters” will be analyzed to see if they apply to the TV sitcom “The Office” Season 5.

“The Office” is a famous mockumentary depicting the office life and workplace of a company called “Dunder Mifflin”. The main focus of the show is one of the company’s branches “Scranton Branch” whose Branch Manager is the notorious “Micheal Scott”. It is a representation of real-life office with awkwardness and absurdity mixed in the splash to make it a perfect recipe for a sitcom of the early 2000s. The main characters other than pan over Jim Halpert, Dwight Schrute, Pam Beasley, and the rest of the team. The focus of this study is season 5 specifically of the show to analyze how and if the sitcom show has those creative humorous worlds created by the makers of the show through disrupted elements of schema in order to create a comic effect and humor.

### **Methodology**

For the purpose of this paper the chosen methodology is qualitative research purely theoretical based keeping in mind the cognitive stylistic approach by Agnes Marszalek (2012).

### **Research Questions**

- How does the viewer’s background knowledge schema impact the interpretation of the sitcom “The Office”?
- How is the cognitive stylistics approach involved in deciphering and interpreting the creation of humor in the sitcom “The Office”?
- How is the humor created through the disruption of schemata – objects, settings, characters and situations in the sitcom “The Office”?

### **Research Objectives**

- To scrutinize the viewer’s background knowledge schema impact the interpretation of the sitcom “The Office”?
- To evaluate the cognitive stylistics approach involved in deciphering and interpreting the creation of humor in the sitcom “The Office”?
- To explore the methods disruption of schemata – objects, settings, characters and situations to create humor in the sitcom “The Office”?

## Literature Review

Language is what makes up the text and subject matter of the literature we read and study. However, the way one uses the language in the said text makes up for the individual style. Part of literature and studying the written language comes with studying text and one of the many approaches used by scholars of language and literature are stylistic approaches. “Stylistics is the study of style in language use including literary works.” (Isti’annah 1).

Stylistics studies can be done on all aspects of language or taken individually by keeping the context of the situation that the text is written in, for instance graphology, narratology, phonology, syntax and lexis (Verdonk 46). Isti’annah (2013) further elaborates stylistics in its unique way highlight the bond between the two and figures out the way to analyze it in such a way that even a highly prosaic and sophisticated text is easily understood in daily language use. Secondly the discipline of stylistics being well-developed and using terminologies and technical theories to prove and exemplify the text in the authentic interpretation. The researcher as formerly mentioned gives the example of stylistic analysis from the perspective of graphology; on the poem “bound to remember” where the absence of capitalization and punctuation is deliberately used by the writer to show the lesser status and literacy of the socio-political leaders of the time, (Isti’annah 4). All these are broader categories and can be sub divided further for the studies of style in time and space in narratology, the concept of context, cohesion, coherence, grammatical and lexical features and rhetorical features etc.

Moreover linguists of the modern age who have stepped into the world of cognitive sciences argue that there lies between our linguistic and other cognitive abilities a joint bond and very close relation between the two pertaining to “thinking, experience, imagination, learning, memory, perception, attention, emotion, reasoning and problem-solving.” as Verdonk elaborates on cognition used for analysis especially when stylistics is combined with cognitive approach it becomes “an interdisciplinary study” of literature and textual language being processed by a reader when he reads it. (Verdonk 140) With the development of this merge of stylistics and cognitive approach as an interdisciplinary, it has made way for novel theories, innovative frameworks and conceptualities for scholars of style, text, literature, subtleties to scrutinize how the mind process the literary text, scripts, visual discourse and what impact is left on the reader’s mind.

As Taylor elaborates how rhetorical text such as figures of speech, metonymy, or metaphor aren’t only used for rhetoric or style but how rhetoric reflects the reader’s interpretation based on his experience of the world (Lee 11). Similarly, theories about schema is also of much fascination to the scholars of cognitive stylistics “for research into readers’ comprehension of texts” (Emmott 67). Stubbs is of the view that enthusiasts of style are prone to notice newer features in literary text than people who merely read or critics and that stylistic analysis done in a systematic way helps to analyze the unconscious linguistic and cultural knowledge. (Stubbs 128). That unconscious linguistic knowledge or cultural knowledge is based on schema which is a concern of the scholar of cognitive stylistics

Stylistic analysis of text uses linguistic theories to analyze the style of the text primarily for interpretation or expected predictions, however cognitive stylistic analysis adds cognitive theories and processes in the process of analysis keeping the schema and background knowledge of the reader and writer, the creator and the viewer. So, it results in a more ‘systematic and explicit accounts’ of the text, visual, script and its response. (Semino, Culpeper 67).

Marszalek (2012) in his paper gives the example of verbal humor in schema theory such as; “They are normal people,’ I said furiously, nodding in illustration out at the street where unfortunately a nun in a brown habit was pushing two babies along in a pram.”

Here the reader has the schematic knowledge of ‘normalcy’ and a ‘nun not being a mother’. So, the mention of baby with a nun is a contrast drawn between motherhood and nun hood and how according to our schema that is not normalcy. So, the incongruity created through the creation of a normal that is not normal, humorous effect is created. (Marszalek 35). Marszalek - a cognitive stylistician and much interested in the creation of humor through technique less likely studied, has worked on psychological, stylistic and schematic ways of creation of humor on works like Diary of Bridget Jones and The Hitchhiker’s guide to the galaxy.

The Office is a famous sitcom and is becoming a new favourite in the research field as many researchers are analyzing the way language has been used throughout the show. One such survey is about how the questions in the office workplace characterize and show the characters’ personalities as well as reveal their life stories. (Baihaqi 168). The show has been subjected to various analysis and comparative studies but there lacks a pure qualitative research work that is substantial in the field of language related to this show, creating a huge research gap which the researcher has tried to fill with this paper.

## **Textual Analysis**

### **Disrupted Schemata**

Disrupted Schemata is a theoretical framework that Agnes Marszalek has formulated in his thesis about humorous worlds. Disrupted schemata are a concept of building elements for a narrative in order to produce comic effect as the researcher mentions “humorous narrative worlds are built to some extent from disrupted world-building elements: 4 disrupted settings, objects, situations, and characters”

### **Creation of Humor through Disrupted Schema**

The fact that a disrupted schemata causes humor is due to the incongruity and absurdity that is caused by disrupting our already set view of the world which results in a humorous effect and to build not one but on fur disrupted elements that build up a fictional absurd world makes it a comic narrative humor appreciation: mainly, we are more likely to be amused by incongruous elements if they appear in an unrealistic context which encourages a playful interpretation – and comic writing are a prime example of that type of context. The role which general, or schematic, knowledge plays in narrative humor processing is through disrupting said knowledge for incongruity

### **Disrupted Schema in The Office – Season 5, Episodes 1 – 10.**

#### **Disrupted Setting**

When schemata for locations can be disrupted to achieve humorous effects. In this element the schemata related to our world view of locations, settings is disrupted in the sense that we interpret things as they are like the mention of an aircraft in the warzone has a serious connotation to it, but when that setting is disrupted through the mixing of a partying and enjoyment and listening to songs “with his ear sets on as two rear gunners attacked” shows the absurdity of the setting and how it is something we are not acclimatized to as something that makes sense. This incongruity is the reason for the reader’s or viewer’s amusement as mentioned before that the

humor is not necessarily jokes and will not sound funny out of context yet the setting in its absurdity produces a comic effect.

**Episode 1** the office and the colleagues more concerned with weight loss than clients and sales. The setting is set by the makers of the show to make it a point of humor through the episode. The schema of a normal work day in an office and how the professional setting and situation of the office is disrupted to create a humorous narrative. **Episode 2** – During the Ethics Meeting, the situation between Micheal and Holly are supposed to be subordinate and status hierarchy, due to the on-going relationship, the meeting is more childish and immature than professional making the rest of the team awkward and it is rather absurd how Micheal uses his authority to flatter Holly. **Episode 3** – Another disrupted setting in the office is when a baby shower is planned for one of the office’s former employees Jan Levinson – now the baby shower is always before the birth of a baby and that’s how it shown in the beginning of the episode as to how the employees prepare for the baby, but the creators disrupt the setting by Jan brining the baby into the office for the baby shower. It instantly disrupts the schema of the audience attached to the concept of baby shower and is evident from Kevin’s dialogue at 10:50 about the games planned all for the time before the birth of a baby “When do you all think the baby will be born” Kevin’s dialogue shows the absurdity of the setting and situation case in point that the baby has already been born.

### Disrupted Objects

When the material objects and entities that make up the setting and fictional world of any narrative are disrupted from their original world view for example a four-legged chair disrupted to a three-legged chair which might not sound funny but when put in association to a disrupted setting, its absurdity increases creating a comic effect. The example the former researcher uses is the object “mattress” and how our schema attached to it is of comfort, but in the narrative the mattress is not an object of comfort at all, which plays on the absurdity of the object for lacking its original schema and thus it doesn’t sound humorous when the whole narrative is displayed it presents comical effect as Marszalek mentions “Schemata for material entities can be disrupted in ways which make them surprising, but not necessarily humorous out of context. As with humorous settings, humorous objects do not need to be inherently amusing. It is the wider narrative context”

Disrupted object – **Episode 3** –The driver’s seat cum stroller is used for many humorous instances throughout the episode whose schema is disrupted to convey a comical situation – for instance Micheal picking up the baby in the driver’s seat or Dwight dragging it through the streets to check its worth.

### Disrupted Characters

“Comic characters are substantial building blocks of humorous worlds” (Marszalek 54). Cognitive stereotypes: The schemata made up of knowledge about people – social schemata or sometimes known as cognitive stereotypes in the (social cognition literature) and the implications it has for characterizations. Knowledge about real-life people is brought into play in the interpretation of fictional characters, and not just knowledge about fictional characters. There is also the exaggerated stereotype like an example of a parent but a Jew or catholic parent will take the absurdity to the next level, as the schemata is disrupted by their obsessive nature of parenting; or a reversal of roles like the child acting as a parent and the parent acting as a child disrupts our normal sense of characterization and lastly the impoliteness of any character makes up for the absurdity and humor in any narrative as it disrupts the schema of our pre-existing knowledge of the social norms.

“Comic characters are just one of the many types of disrupted world-building elements found in humorous narratives. Next to disrupted situations, objects and locations, they help to introduce incongruity to humorous worlds.”

### **Micheal Scott**

**Episode 1** – Interrupts Jim and Pam’s conversation while they are skying and acts like an elated family member and roams around the office with Pam on the laptop – an absurd situation that won’t happen in a normal office setting. It disrupts the viewers’ perception of a schema when it comes to office life and by disruption of the schema attached to a branch manager and boss – it creates absurdity and comicality in the scene and show. **Episode 2** – Acts like a child through the whole episode, throws tantrums and tries to be sad and sulky and disrupts the work flow, because the woman he likes who is his subordinate pointed out something that he doesn’t want to do and through previous seasons, Micheal’s character has been written as a spineless character who is unable to take any strict action against his employees even in dire situations and when someone does, he calls the workplace a family. It is an intentional trope in the office by the creators, to create that absurd setting in order to create a humorous world of the office by disrupting the schemata attached to office in the audience’s perception. 15:48 Micheal – it’s a family. Holly: It’s not a family – it’s a workplace. **Episode 8** – The reaction of a manager to the return of one of the HR employees, should be welcoming and professional, but to create humor, the creators disrupt the schema attached to the situation by making Micheal react extremely by an onslaught of “No’s” getting louder by the second and then trying to forget that encounter by comparing it to being molested. **Episode 9** – The manager should handle the situation and facilitate the employees either with chairs or a photocopier with the surplus money of the branch. Instead he takes the money all for himself and tries to pit the team against each other. The comic effect is created when the team surprises Micheal by taking the unanimous decision and Micheal is forced to renew the furniture in the office.

**Dwight Schrute** – A character that is eccentric and rigid and a staunch believer of his views and likes to empirically tests it. The writer tries to create humor in the show through his character that ensues incongruity and comicality to an extent that it is absurd thus creating humor. In **episode 3** – to prove whether a stroller should cost 1200 dollars which he claims he spends on his bomb shelter or less than it, indulges in many absurd actions to break the stroller. This is the disruption of a schema attached to characterization making extreme decisions on parts of characters to create absurdity-based humor. 11:30, 12:45 – 13:00, 17:30

**Jan Levinson** – **Episode 3** – Belts songs out and sings inappropriate songs while holding a baby that is not related to anyone in the office and making herself the center of attention after having lied about the due date of the baby’s birth and making the whole team awkward by listening to her unrelenting singing which is a disruption from the normal schema and understanding of the viewer of a gathering with balanced conversations and appropriate dialogue.

### **Disrupted Situation**

The schemata related to the normal on goings of the world and its components and order and arrangement of actions and dialogues when disrupted produced a disrupted situation. The situation disrupted will cause an absurdity in the normal carrying out of the action which brings a comic effect overall like examples given by the former researcher of disruption of the normal office life or adding elements of fantastic or unrealistic situations to create absurdity cum comic effect in narratives.

**Episode 2** - In the same episode, the case of an employee comes to volition that goes against the ethics of the workplace and has to be fired, whereas Micheal though unfazed by the whole situation, tries to dismiss the situation and later in the episode actively tries to sabotage Holly in order to keep Meredith working despite of the work place violation. It is the creators' way of creating an absurd character who in place of a manger acts nothing like one. **Episode 3** – The episode starts with Micheal and Dwight preparing for the birth of a baby with a watermelon. First the schema is disrupted in the viewer's perception of how a birth should take place by playing at the opposite gender having the baby as well as the situation is absurd with a grown man running around a workplace with a watermelon to train the manager for the birth of the baby. **Episode 5** – The employee transfer of Holly Beckett in a courier truck is one of the absurdist scene that is created through the disruption of the schemata attached to journeys – specifically professional transfers which is completely inverted when the two characters start to have a major breakdown in the truck which is already crowded with a third person who is completely uninvolved in the situation and has to call someone to distract himself from the chaos that is happening in the other seat. The whole scene is absurd and it creates a great humorous narrative. **Episode 6** – Micheal puts Jim and Dwight on a sales role play which escalates from 7:30 to 11:45 from a joke on the client's name to Dwight's over obsessiveness with being right and correct to Jim's character having a knack for pulling Dwight's leg to the point that Dwight starts shouting at the client. It is a meta play at the creators creating a scene where two of the characters create a scene that is absurd yet leading to humor. It is a disruption of the schema attached to meetings and workshops between employees.

### **Conclusion**

#### **Conclusion should summarise the findings.**

This paper is significant as the theory of cognitive stylistics though have been used time and again for many analyses regarding literary texts but has not been used with humor in this regard specifically. The extent of cognitive stylistics into visual media is a newer avenue and less researched. This paper is an important contribution to the field as it successfully highlights many instances in the selected episodes as to how humor is created through disruption of a situation for instance the former episodes of the mentioned season disrupts many natural settings of the office and creates an absurd situation that the viewer can't help but laugh at the incongruity – such as the obsession with weight loss and leaving the important work of sales, the baby shower that happens with the baby present there. Other instances of disruption of characters is obvious through the characters of Dwight and Micheal and how they pose a comedy through diligently acting in character and making the whole scenario absurd Lastly the different back and forth between Jim and Dwight make up for the most absurd situations as the screenwriters have tried to disrupt any normal situation to a heightened extreme case by introducing absurdity into their dialogue. All these instances lead the researcher to the outcome that humor is thus created in a narrative when a schema regarding a situation or character is disrupted to an extent of incongruity. Although, the cognitive stylistic approach theories can be applied for a number of theories ranging from cognition, to stylistics, to linguistics in many aspects, but for this paper the theory has been limited to only one season – season 5. However, it is a great avenue for future researchers to resurface more of the show in similar light or delve deeper into the sitcom world and explore the theory in depth.

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