'Yeah but no but yeah': A linguistic perspective on the humour of *Little Britain*

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The appeal of *Little Britain* it is not based purely on visual comedy, being originally launched on BBC Radio 4 then transferred to television; its humour originates in the language used. This chapter[1] will examine the humour of *Little Britain* from a linguistic perspective. In particular, I will show how schema theory, a useful tool for analysing comedy, can shed light on the construction and interpretation of humour in the show.

Schema Theory and Humour

'Schema theory' is 'an umbrella term covering a range of individual cognitive models at the heart of which are situated the core concept *schema* and the attendant concepts *frame*, *scenario* and *script*' (Simpson 2004: 89). These are just some of the terms used by researchers within the theory. I will use both *schema* and *script* as unmarked terms for this type of cognitive structure: *schema* (pl. *schemata*) when talking about the concept in general and *script* to refer to specific examples.

Schemata are organized packages of knowledge based on previous experience of objects, events, and situations, which are stored in memory; they may be defined as 'mental representations of typical instances' (Cook 1994: 11). Such bundles of

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[1] The chapter is a revised and extended version of an article originally published in *English Today* (Snell 2006).

knowledge are continually updated according to new experiences, and the basic claim of schema theory is that:

> a new experience is understood by comparison with a stereotypical version of a similar experience held in memory. The new experience is then processed in terms of its deviation from the stereotypical version, or conformity to it.

> (Cook 1994: 9)

According to schema theory, meanings are constructed in the interaction between a text and the interpreter's background knowledge. Schemata are activated by either linguistic items in the text or contextual cues. Once activated, schemata generate expectations, and these expectations fill in what is not explicitly mentioned in the text. Expectations may be subverted, however, resulting in incongruity, and this incongruity may give rise to humour.

Raskin (1985) and Attardo (2001) have formalized the concept of incongruity as opposition between semantic scripts in theories which borrow terminology from schema theory: the 'Semantic Script Theory of Humour' and the 'General Theory of Verbal Humour'. The basic premise of these theories is that a text can be characterized as humorous if it is compatible with two opposing scripts. Examples of script opposition will become apparent in the following analysis.

Social schemata

Much of the humour in *Little Britain* emanates from 'larger than life' characters often based on recognisable stereotypes. Culpeper (2002: 262) states that first impressions of characters are guided by schemata; people often perceive others as members of social groups rather than as individuals. Such groups, according to

Culpeper (2001, 2002), provide the basis for cognitive categories. He suggests that the social categories which people use in their perception of others include three broad groupings:

o *personal categories* (preferences, interests, traits and goals);

o *social-role categories* (kinship roles, occupational roles and relational roles);

o *group membership categories* (gender, race, class, age, nationality, religion).

(Culpeper 2001: 75-6)

Culpeper argues (2001: 77) that 'generally, when a category is activated, so too is the network of which it is a part'. It is this network, which contains links between the different social categories, that he describes as a 'social schema'. Such links arise as a result of experience: particular social roles tend to be filled by certain kinds of people. Based on their experience of the sorts of people who generally fill the occupational role of accountant, for example, some people may have a social schema for ACCOUNTANT that includes links to personality traits or to group-membership categories such as gender and class (e.g. 'boring, introverted, middle-class male'). The schema is not necessarily based on direct experience, but could be influenced by stereotypical images that appear in the media, for example. Two of the recurring characters from *Little Britain*, Emily Howard and Vicky Pollard, illustrate how this concept can be applied.

Emily Howard

Emily is a failed transvestite: a man who dresses as a woman in a rather unconvincing manner, yet tries to persuade people that he is 'a lady'. Two Emily Howard sketches from the first series of *Little Britain* are reprinted below.

Text 1: Emily Howard – pub

Emily has just wandered into a seaside pub. 'Her' entrance is dramatic and theatrical:

Emily: Ooh, ah! Ooh, ah! Absolutely tipping it down out there. That's the only reason I came in here alone, without a chaperone. I am a lady, you see. Please, pay me no heed. ((Goes to the bar)) I've never been in a pub before. Tell me, what does one do?

Landlord: Well, you can order a drink if you like, mate.

Emily: Yes, I'll have a lady's drink, s'il vous plait.

Landlord: What can I get you?

Vic: I'd like to buy the lady a drink.

Emily: ((Shocked)) What?

Vic: I said I'd like to buy you a drink if that's OK.

Emily: But I'm a lady.

Vic: Yeah, I know. And I'd like to buy you a drink.

Emily: Oh erm- well er er er a drinkypoopoo. Yes, I'll have a slimline tonic water, please.

Landlord: ((Suspicious)) Right you are.

Emily:	And um, two packets of crisps. Do you have Barbecued Beef variety? Merci beaucoup.
Landlord:	((Nods and gives Emily two bags of crisps))
Vic:	Cheers.
Emily:	Chin chin ((takes a tiny sip))
Vic:	So tell me a little bit about yourself.
Emily	Well, my name is Emily. Emily Howard. And I am a lady. And because I'm a lady, I like to do ladies' things, like attend the operettas and les ballets imaginaries. Do you like the theatre?
Vic:	No, but I like you.
Emily:	Well, you must know that I am a lady! I press flowers and stroke kittens and swim in rivers wearing dresses and hats, and shit.
Vic:	You're a very lovely looking lady.
Emily:	((Laughs coquettishly for far too long))
Emily:	((Coy)) You embarrass me. I must go and powder my nose . . . . .

('Emily Howard – Pub', 1: 1)

Text 2: Emily Howard – X-Ray

Emily is in the X-Ray room of a hospital waiting for the doctor:

Doctor:	Right, sorry to keep you. ((Checking clipboard)) So, Eddie Howard.
Emily:	Emily Howard. I'm a lady, Emily Howard, yes.
Doctor:	Right, uh, what happened?

Emily: Well, I was disembarking a motor coach when I took a tumble.

Doctor: You fell off the bus?

Emily: Quite.

Doctor: Right, well, I'm going to need to do an X-ray of the whole leg. So if

            you'd just like to place this over your testicles.

((The doctor hands Emily a small pillow. She is quite alarmed))

Emily: Ooh, doctor, you do amuse!

Doctor: No, it's not a joke. It's got a sheet of lead in it. It uh deflects the

            radiation.

Emily: But I am a lady. I – I don't have testiclés [pronounced [testɪleɪ]]. Well,

            perhaps… little ladies' testicles.

((Emily pulls out a Chinese Fan from her Handbag and moves it around her

midriff))

Emily: Might, er, might er this do for me instead?

Doctor: No.

Emily: Or er or this?

((Emily pulls out a Victoria copy of *The Lady* magazine))

Emily: Surely I er hm?

((Emily pulls out a small white fluffy cat))

Doctor: I'm sorry. You need to use this. ((He hands Emily the special pillow))

Emily: Well, would you mind if I brightened it up a little with some appliqué

            and décollage? Yes I could sew some lace around the edges.

Doctor: We don't really have time for this, Mr Howard.

Emily: But I am a lady.

Doctor: Well I can't give you the X-ray without it.

Emily: Well, do you know, I think I am feeling rather better. Yes, I don't
           think I need an X-ray at all. Yes.

((Emily climbs off the bed uneasily and in great pain))

Emily: ((Manly)) Aargh! Shit!

('Emily Howard – X-Ray, 1: 4)

When presented with the lexical item 'lady', the audience constructs a cognitive
representation by identifying and activating a script, LADY. *Little Britain* plays on an
old-fashioned stereotype of 'a lady'. This comes across in the character's language,
as well as in her dress (long skirt, high-necked frilly blouse and elaborate period
wig) and the props which appear in the sketch. According to Schank and Abelson
(1977), 'props' are one of the 'slots' that form part of a script. For the Emily
Howard sketches these include a parasol (despite the fact that there is no sun), and a
Victorian copy of *The Lady* magazine. These objects belong within a specific track
of the script LADY such as VICTORIAN LADY. These scripts generate a network of
links and associations that may be said to constitute the social schema. For example,
there are links to interests: *attend the operettas and les ballets imaginaries*; *press
flowers and stroke kittens and swim in rivers wearing dresses and hats*; *appliqué and
décollage*. Various traits are also alluded to. Emily's notion of a lady is coquettish,
refined and sophisticated. These more abstract attributes cannot be observed but
have to be inferred, and such inferences can be made through a character's language.
Lexical items such as *chaperone* and *motor coach* and the phrase *pay me no heed*

allude to a bygone era where Emily's old-fashioned notions of gentility belong. The lexical items *drinkypoopoo* and *chin chin* are stereotypically feminine and 'upper-class'. Emily uses idiomatic French phrases such as *s'il vous plait* and *merci beaucoup* as well as mock French pronunciation (e.g. *testiclé* [testɪleɪ]), in order to suggest sophistication.

Emily displays many of the characteristics sometimes thought to be 'typical' of women's speech (Lakoff 1975): super polite forms (e.g. the euphemism *powder my nose*); emphatic stress (e.g. *Absolutely*); and fillers such as *well*. Of course, in terms of linguistic research in this area, conceptions of women's language have moved on significantly. Many linguists have challenged Lakoff's set of 'women's language' features (see Cameron et al 1989; Coates 1996; Holmes 1995). This is not to say that such features are any less important in forming an impression of a character, however, especially in relation to *Little Britain* where the stereotype that is being created for humorous purposes is not concerned with reality.

Little Britain plays on an old-fashioned stereotype of 'a lady'. Emily Howard's conception of women's speech is similar to that described by Jespersen (1922: 246) where women prefer refined expression and avoid coarse and vulgar language. It is obvious to the audience when Emily switches out of this mode. In order for linguistic forms to carry meanings over and above referential meaning 'they must be sufficiently salient when they are uttered' (Podesva 2006: 189). In these sketches, the word *shit* has what Podesva (2006: 189) calls 'categorical salience', whereby 'infrequent variants stand out more than frequent variants'. Because expletives are infrequent in the Emily Howard sketches, they are categorically salient and can thus be used stylistically for humorous purposes. Emily's use of the word *shit* in both sketches is foregrounded against the rest of her language. These examples are

evidence of Emily 'slipping out' of character. Her failure to perform the role of 'a lady' is thus heightened.

The social schema that Emily represents is incongruent with the more modern representation of a 'lady' (even more so of a 'women') that the audience is likely to have constructed to operate in daily life. As a result, Emily is a failure as a 'lady', and the character is also a failure as a transvestite. The script for TRANSVESTITE includes the information that a transvestite is a man who dresses up in women's clothes. This script is unlikely, however, to contain the information that a transvestite should try and actually convince people that they are in fact 'a lady', and repeatedly state 'I am a lady'. The incongruity between Emily's perception of herself and what the audience actually sees gives rise to humour. This incongruity is reflected in script oppositions such as OLD-FASHIONED/MODERN, LADY/MAN, REALISTIC/UNREALISTIC, SUCCESS/FAILURE.

Vicky Pollard

In the following sketch, overlapping speech is shown by a square bracket placed at the beginning of the overlap in both utterances.

Text 3: Vicky Pollard – Magistrates' Court

Vicky is accused of shop-lifting and is being interrogated by the prosecution lawyer.

Lawyer: Vicky Pollard you have been charged with shoplifting. On the 11th April, it is alleged you went into the Erskine branch of Superdrug. Once there you attempted to steal an eyeliner pencil and can of Red Bull by concealing them in your leggings . . . . .Now in the face of the

overwhelming evidence we've heard today against you, do you stand by your plea of 'Not guilty'?

Vicky: No but yeah but no because what happened was right this thing happened what I don't know nothing about shut up I wasn't meant to be anywhere even near there. Then Meredith came over and started stirring it all up started calling me all these things about this thing I didn't even know about or somefink or nuffin'

[The Lawyer is stumped]

Lawyer: Right, but you admit you were in Superdrug at the time?

Vicky: No but yeah but no because there's this whole other thing what I didn't even know about and Meredith said it weren't a thing but it was but don't listen to her because she's a complete slag.

Lawyer: Sorry, Meredith? Who is Meredith?

Vicky: She's the one who done that thing about the thing but if she gives you sweets don't eat 'em because she's dirty.

Lawyer: Thing? What – what thing?

Vicky: Yeah, I know and anyway and there was this whole other thing what I didn't even know about or somefink or nuffin' because nobody told Wayne Duggin that Jermyn fingered Carly round the back of the ice rink.

Lawyer: Right.

Vicky: But I was supposed to be doing Home Ec. But I wasn't right I was on the phone to Jules. But anyway don't listen to her because she had a baby and didn't tell anyone.

Lawyer: Vicky, were you at Superdrug at the time?

Vicky: No but yeah but no but yeah but no but yeah but no because I wasn't even with Amber.

Lawyer: Amber? Who's Amber?

Vicky: Yeah, exactly. I wasn't even with her and anyway I didn't even know who she is so you'd better ask her.

Lawyer: Vicky I don't think you realise the gra[vity of the situation you–

Vicky: [No but there's something right what I didn't –

Lawyer: If you're found [guilty today –

Vicky: [No you definitely can't say that right bec-

Lawyer: You'll have a cri[minal record.

Vicky: [No but I'm allergic to cat hair so I don't have to go into lessons.

Lawyer: This is a [court of law, you have t- Are you going to keep interrupting me?

Vicky: [No cos – Towser, right, well he no no no no no no no no no I'm not, I'm… going to let you speak.

Lawyer: Good. . Now we've heard from the social [workers.

Vicky: [Oh my God, right

there was this whole other thing I[completely forgot to tell you

about.

Lawyer: [Oh I give up!

Vicky: You know Craig? Well he felt up Amy on the corkscrew at

Alton Towers and her mum had an eppy [epileptic fit]. But

then Dean went on the Mary Rose and was sick on Louise

Farren's head.

(Vicky Pollard – Magistrates Court, 1: 4)

Vicky represents the stereotype of a working-class teenager or 'chav'. The sort of person that this word refers to was (and still is) a current social phenomenon that the writers of *Little Britain* were able to capitalise on. In her book, *Larpers and shroomers: the language report*, Susie Dent cites 'chav' as 'a contender for the word of 2004'. The term found its way into the *Oxford English Dictionary* in June 2006:

> a young person of a type characterized by brash and loutish behaviour and the wearing of designer-style clothes (esp. sportswear); usually with connotations of a low social status.

As suggested by this definition, the script for CHAV makes a number of links between the group membership categories 'age' (i.e. teenager) and 'class' (i.e. working-class or 'underclass'), and personal categories (e.g. 'brash and loutish behaviour'). A brief review of some of the 128 definitions of 'chav' posted on the

Urban Dictionary demonstrates the public consensus concerning the delineation of this social schema:

> The female chav (chavette) will have peroxide blonde hair scrunched so tight into a pony tail with colourful scrunchies that her forehead stretches. She will wear a dark blue tracksuit with white stripes, an enormous puffa jacket, hoop earrings, and white trainers.

> A young British 'person', bottom bottom class in both status and culture, favouring baseball caps, fake 'sports' 'labels', tracksuit bottoms tucked into their socks, trainers that cost the same amount of money as a flat deposit, and an unspeakably antisocial manner: a juvenile ruffian.

> Most Chav words are mercifully brief, and sentences tend to be punctuated with 'innit' or some sort of expletive.

> Unable to converse in any high form of language and too lazy to communicate the limited vocabulary they have properly.

In terms of appearance and behaviour, Vicky Pollard fits this schema perfectly. The last two definitions show that there is also public perception of the sort of language a 'chav' uses. How then does Vicky Pollard's language reflect (or reinforce) the social schema TEENAGE CHAV?

Following the launch of the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT), a number of studies have focused on the speech of teenagers. Andersen (1997: 2) used the corpus to research pragmatic markers in teenage conversation,

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and notes: '[t]eenage talk in general is said to be highly expressive and vivid, and teenagers are said to use language as a means of expressing and evoking emotional involvement rather than for the communication of facts and logical ideas'. Vicky's speech certainly conveys very little that is factual or logical. The perception of her language as being incoherent is due in part to her use of pragmatic markers such as *but*, *right*, *because*, *anyway*, which do not add anything to the propositional content of her speech.

Andersen aims to test the perception that teenagers use pragmatic markers in conversation to a greater extent than adults do by comparing conversations from the COLT corpus with a subset of the British National Corpus (BNC), which includes mainly adult speakers. His findings show that the claim that teenagers use more pragmatic markers than adults does not hold: teenagers use certain markers (such as *right*, *really*, *actually*, *anyway)* more frequently, while adults use other markers (such as *well*, *I mean*, *I think*, *I guess*) more frequently. Figure 1 compares Andersen's results with the speech of Vicky Pollard for five salient pragmatic markers. The occurrence of these markers in Vicky's dialogue in the sketch 'Vicky Pollard – Magistrates Court' was counted and compared to Vicky's total word count in order to derive a figure ('frequency per 1000 words') comparable to Andersen's data. So, for example, Vicky utters 337 words in this sketch and uses the pragmatic marker *anyway* three times. We can say therefore that, on average, Vicky uses this marker 8.9 times per 1000 words (3/337 x 1000).
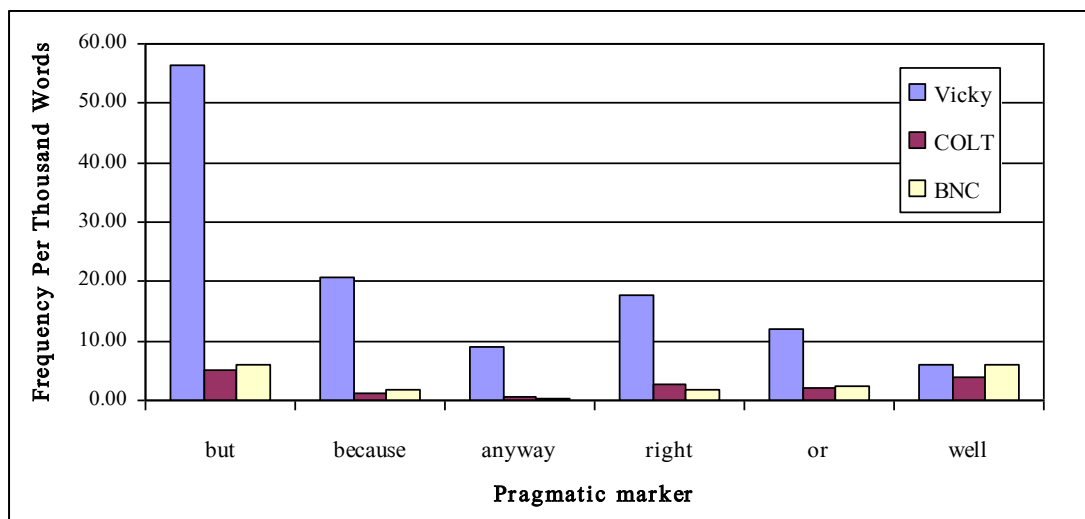
Figure 1: Comparison of Anderson's (1997) results with the speech of Vicky Pollard

Vicky's speech includes many more pragmatic markers than either the teenage or adult conversations used by Andersen (Figure 1). This is most noticeable with *but*, which is part of Vicky's trademark catch-phrase *yeah but no but yeah*. The point is that, although Andersen's data does not support the hypothesis that teenagers use significantly more pragmatic markers than adults, the perception that this is the case leads to comedic exaggerations of this particular speech style in characters like Vicky Pollard; it becomes part of the social schema for TEENAGER or CHAV. The link between pragmatic markers and the social categories of 'teenager' or 'chav' is not direct. To use Och's (1991) terminology, frequent use of pragmatic markers directly indexes incoherence in discourse and only indirectly indexes teenage or chav language. The link to the social category of teenager or chav is only through a series of ideological conventions which associate incoherence with teenage/chav identity. Such ideologies are not necessarily based in fact, but they still inform our interpretations of language use and other behaviour.

Vicky's speech reinforces other stereotypical assumptions about the language of a 'chav'. She uses taboo language (e.g. *slag*) and non-standard grammatical

constructions (e.g. *what I don't know nothing about*). As Culpeper (2001:17) points out, 'knowing what the linguistic stereotypes are is valuable, since these are the currency of the layperson'. The likelihood that stereotypical assumptions do not have empirical validity does not alter their importance in forming character impressions. In fact, this particular social schema may not be based on personal experience at all, but be driven by the image of the 'chav' that has been constructed within media and popular discourse. You do not necessarily have to know someone like Vicky Pollard personally in order to be able to access this social schema.

The importance of context

Vicky Pollard and Emily Howard illustrate the humour that is created from the exploitation of social stereotypes. But the importance of context for these characters should also be highlighted, for it is often in their inability to act appropriately according to the situation that these stereotypes become more pronounced. Emily Howard and Vicky Pollard have maximum impact in the show because they are based on familiar social schemata, but also surprise the audience in that they have some unusual distortion brought about through interaction with an unexpected context and their inability to act appropriately in that given context. In Culpeper's terms, Vicky Pollard and Emily Howard are examples of 'exaggerated prototypes'. Such characters are not simply the prototype of some social category, that is the average or the norm, but prototypical in some exaggerated way. Characters are perceived as exaggerated prototypes if:

o they fail to exhibit contextually sensitive behaviour;

o they simply appear in situations where they are not expected.

<div align="right">(Culpeper 2001: 88-9)</div>

In 'Emily Howard – X-Ray', Emily's behaviour (linguistic and other) is inappropriate considering the hospital setting. Faced with strict time constraints, doctors 'typically want to arrive as quickly as possible at a diagnosis' (Wodak 1997: 343), and they require the patient's cooperation in doing this. Patients may be considered 'difficult' if their behaviour disrupts this process (Wodak 1997: 351). With this in mind, the elaborate avoidance strategies that Emily adopts when faced with the prospect of an X-ray appear deviant. The doctor comments on the time constraints that frame this situation: *We don't really have time for this, Mr Howard.* Emily does not adhere to convention, however. Her behaviour in the examination room is contrary to normal expectations. At the start of the scene, even her initial explanation of the accident appears odd: *I was disembarking a motor coach when I took a tumble.* Grice (1975) suggests that participants in a conversation are guided by an overarching 'Cooperative Principle':

> Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the
>
> stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the
>
> talk exchange in which you are engaged.

<div align="right">(Grice 1975: 45)</div>

This principle encompasses four maxims, which are summarised below:

o *quantity*: provide the amount of information that is appropriate given the purposes of the exchange;

<div align="center">17</div>

o *quality*: do not state that which you know to be false, or for which you lack adequate evidence;

o *manner*: be clear, brief, and unambiguous;

o *relation*: be relevant.

Emily's deliberately obscure explanation violates the maxim of manner, and is particularly inappropriate in this context. This point is reinforced by the doctor's simple reformulation: *You fell off the bus*. The use of a periphrasis for 'fell' (*took a tumble*), and the obsolete noun *motor coach* for 'bus' highlights the script oppositions FORMAL/INFORMAL and OLD-FASHIONED/ MODERN. At the end of the sketch, Emily actually denies herself medical treatment in order to maintain the role of 'a lady'. As an exaggerated prototype, Emily cannot modify her behaviour, even in a serious medical situation.

We see similar behaviour from Vicky Pollard in the sketch 'Vicky Pollard – Magistrates Court'. The situation activates the script for COURTROOM, and this script generates expectations about appropriate behaviour. The COURTROOM script is likely to include information such as: the lawyer and judge are the only people who are able to ask questions, and these questions should be answered by the witness in an efficient manner. In this sketch, the lawyer addresses direct questions to Vicky, but she consistently fails to provide the preferred response. In fact, Vicky's responses do not make any sense at all in this context. Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle provides a framework of conversational expectations which when broken may trigger interpretative activity. On this basis, the audience will notice something deviant about Vicky's speech. The lawyer is certainly stumped by Vicky's first turn in the interaction. The lawyer has asked Vicky a direct yes/no question: *do you stand*

by your plea of 'Not guilty'? Vicky's answer violates Grice's maxims of quantity (by giving far more information than is required), manner (by being deliberately obscure and unnecessarily wordy) and relation (because her answer bears no relevance to the question). The lawyer attempts to get back on track with the pragmatic marker *Right,* but his attempts are thwarted. The lawyer searches for relevance in Vicky's remarks (*Sorry, Meredith? Who is Meredith?*), supporting Grice's (1975) claim that people assume cooperation in conversation (a far greater expectation in this context), but he finds none. Vicky's utterances are deliberately vague: *who done that thing about the thing; this whole other thing; somefink or nuffin.* Her catch-phrase *no but yeah but no* is symbolic of the general incoherence of her discourse.

The COURTROOM script also contains information about appropriate discourse routines, and activates a turn-taking script whereby the balance of power lies with the lawyer. His discourse role affords him certain rights, such as the right to speak at length without interruption. In this sketch, though, it is Vicky, who does most of the talking. Vicky has 337 words distributed over 13 turns (average turn length: 25.9 words), while the lawyer has 150 words distributed over 13 turns (average turn length: 11.5 words). Moreover, Vicky consistently interrupts the lawyer, thereby denying him his speaking rights. The lawyer explicitly refers to the rules that *should* govern this interaction: *This is a court of law...Are you going to keep interrupting me?* This is the only occasion when Vicky responds with a firm 'no' to what appears to be a yes/no question. The irony is that, on this occasion, the lawyer's utterance is not functioning as a question, but rather as a command with the intended meaning, 'Stop interrupting me'. Vicky does not comply with this command, however. The power differential in this interaction has been reversed, and the lawyer, who should

occupy high status, actually withdraws from the situation: *Oh I give up*. This constitutes the final punch line. The script for COURTROOM gives way to TEENAGE GOSSIP.

Cultural schemata

The wide appeal of *Little Britain* is evidenced by its being broadcast to a number of countries outside Britain, including the USA, Canada, Australia and Japan. There are many people, both in Britain and outside it, however, who do not appreciate its humour. Can schema theory help to explain why?

I would argue that, to a certain extent, schema theory *can* account for the different reactions that separate sections of the audience may have. According to the theory, the process of interpretation involves a combination of textual factors and background knowledge. Because people have distinct kinds of background knowledge and beliefs, it is possible for different people to construct quite different interpretations of the same text. Of course, some people may have very similar schemata and thus extract shared meaning from a text.

Semino (1997: 124) notes that 'the content of schemata will vary from individual to individual, and, more dramatically, from culture to culture.' This is an apt point with regard to humour since many of us may have experienced the embarrassment that results from making a joke which does not successfully transcend cultural boundaries. The changes which Lucas and Walliams will no doubt make to the show's American version will reveal differences in the culture, history and traditions of the US audience compared to viewers in the UK. Social groups differentiated by age, class, gender and ethnicity, as well as geography, may produce different interpretations of texts. Davies (1990: 312), in his book *Ethnic Humor Around the*

World, makes the point that the (humorous) qualities imputed to a group can be interpreted and evaluated in many ways. He notes that individual members of a ridiculed group could interpret the joke as referring to a subgroup other than the one to which he or she belongs. It is possible, therefore, for members of both the ingroup and outgroup to appreciate the same joke (albeit through different interpretations). Do the working-class viewers of *Little Britain*, for example, laugh at Vicky Pollard because they see her as a member of a working-class subgroup (the 'underclass' or 'chavs') to which they do not belong?

Comedy schema

Whatever background the interpreter is coming from, I would argue that most individuals interpret humorous texts under an overarching comedy schema. This concept is similar to Stockwell's (2002: 80-1) notion of a literary schema. He states that a literary schema is 'a higher-level conceptual structure that organises our ways of reading when we are in the literary context':

> Any ordinary schema can appear in a literary context, but once there it is treated in a different way as a result of literary reading. It is this reading angle that 're-registers' the original schema and processes it in terms of literary factors.
>
> (Stockwell 2002: 80)

When interpreting a text under the comedy schema, we do not take what we see to be literally true. We would not, for example, update our script for LADY according to the behaviour of Emily Howard.

After experiencing the *Little Britain* sketches on a number of different occasions, I would hypothesize that viewers create new scripts based upon the characters in the

show under an over-arching comedy schema. The mention of the name Emily Howard, for example, would then activate the script for EMILY HOWARD: FAILED TRANSVESTITE. Catch-phrases are so closely associated with the characters in *Little Britain* that hearing a catch-phrase could easily activate the relevant script. Eventually, when enough people share the same schematic knowledge, it becomes possible to evoke laughter among one's friends and colleagues by the mere repetition of 'I am a lady' or 'yeah but no but' because these phrases are able to activate the relevant script with all its related humorous links and associations. For anyone who does not possess the relevant schemata, there is no evident reason why the catch-phrase should be interpreted as funny.

Repetition is a powerful tool in comedy. Although repetition of a joke will diminish its humorous effect, variation on a familiar theme has the double impact of creating humour anew while also evoking memories of previous humour. The laughter is thus experienced on two separate levels. With *Little Britain*, repetition of character sketches creates new schemata based on those characters which can then be used to interpret and reinterpret the humour. With each new sketch, the familiar characters are presented to the audience in a unique context, and the audience's existing schemata are reorganised accordingly. After three series, however, the sketches may cease to be 'schema refreshing' (Cook 1994), that is, the sketches would activate existing schemata but lack the novelty required to humorously challenge and then update these schemata. It is at this point that audiences begin to lose interest in the characters and the show. Perhaps this fact influenced the decision not to continue the show into a fourth series.

For many people, the name 'Vicky Pollard' activates not only VICKY POLLARD: WORKING CLASS TEENAGER but CHAV; Vicky Pollard has come to symbolise a female chav (or 'chavette'). A definition from *Urban Dictionary* states simply:

> Chavettes (female species if you already didn't know) are summed
>
> up perfectly by the one & only Mat Lucas in "Little Britain"
>
> Two words- Vicky Pollard!!

The media certainly exploits this association. British newspapers abound with references to 'Vicky Pollard' which rely on the activation of scripts such as CHAV: 'the Vicky Pollard types who become single mothers' (David Smith, *The Sunday Times*, 7 January 2007*)*; 'a Vicky Pollard community' (Jessica Shepherd, *The Guardian*, 23 October 2007); 'a nation of Vicky Pollards' (Rob Draper, *The Daily Mail*, 20 February 2005); 'a generation of Vicky Pollards' (Sara Wallis, *The Mirror*, 3 May 2007). By activating the script VICKY POLLARD in the minds of their readers, these journalists can tap into a network of associations and images which frame their story.

Interplay between verbal and non-verbal humour

I have so far not mentioned the non-verbal humour in *Little Britain*. Norrick (2004: 401) makes the point that '[m]any jokes fall outside the province of script theory, because they depend on performance in various ways.' I would argue, however, that some aspects of non-verbal performance can be incorporated into schema-based theories if we consider that both verbal and non-verbal elements are capable of activating schemata. In fact, verbal and visual elements may activate conflicting/incongruous schemata, giving rise to humour. The *Little Britain* sketches involving the characters Lou and Andy, for example, successfully exploit this

technique since the humour often lies in the incongruity between Andy's speech and the secret actions of Lou, which the audience (but crucially not Andy) are privy to. In 'Lou and Andy – Diving Board' (1:1), for example, the audience hears Lou make a long request to the lifeguard for help in assisting his disabled friend, Andy, into the swimming pool: *Excuse me, I wonder if you could give me a hand. I'm here with a friend, who you may have seen is in a wheelchair. And I need a little bit of help getting him in and out of the pool…he's not a strong swimmer…So shall we go help him in?* In the background, Andy, unseen by Lou, has climbed the steps to the tallest diving board, jumped into the pool, swam to the steps, got back out, and sat down again in his wheel chair. Lou's speech activates scripts such as DISABLED, POOR SWIMMER, CARER, while Andy's behaviour activates the conflicting scripts ABLE-BODIED, COMPETENT SWIMMER, MISGUIDED FRIEND. A useful starting point for an examination of the interplay between verbal and visual humour would be a comparison of the *Little Britain* televisions sketches with the original radio performances. Not surprisingly, the Lou and Andy characters did not feature in the radio sketches.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted a number of ways in which schema theory can be applied to research on humour. As well as giving an insight into the construction of humour in *Little Britain*, schema theory has also been able to demonstrate how *Little Britain*'s audience could construct different interpretations from the same sketches and/or appreciate different aspects of the humour. As a by-product of this analysis, I hope to have demonstrated how popular texts, such as *Little Britain*, could be used in the classroom to illustrate the application of a linguistic theory. Indeed, such texts

could be used to help people, in particular those learning another language, to understand the humour of other cultures.

Transcription Conventions

Transcripts of the sketches are based on those used in the official compilation of scripts (Lucas and Walliams 2004) with the following modifications:

[completely forgot	Brackets signal the start of overlapping speech
[Oh I give up!	
....	Pause
((Goes to the bar))	Annotation of other verbal/non-verbal activity
[pronounced [testɪleɪ]].	Transcriber's comments

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