HUMOUR AND IRONY AT WORK: THE CASE OF '*GREY'S ANATOMY*'

Daniela Sorea

Abstract: The present paper endeavours to probe into the way humorous exchanges among the protagonists in the TV series '*Grey's Anatomy'* become a resourceful tool in the delineation of social identity and interpersonal rapports at work. The pragmatic analysis of several conversations unfolding in the medical milieu is intended to evaluate the role irony and humour play in highlighting the characters' intentions and behavioural patterns. Teasing and mocking remarks as well as scathingly critical or disdainful repartees constitute linguistic resources which, although expected to damage the interlocutor's face, often lead to engender solidarity and enhance empathy.

Key words: workplace irony, relevant inappropriateness, supportive versus contestive humour, social identity

1. Aim of the paper

It is in the intention of this study to shed some light on the way conversational joking, ranging from mild reprimanding or gentle teasing to ruthlessly conveying disapproval, scorn or outrage, becomes a resourceful tool in the assimilation of social and professional identity and in the dynamics of establishing social proximity or distance in the TV series '*Grey's Anatomy'*. My analysis of several conversations from the series is intended to pinpoint the functions humour plays in highlighting the characters' intentions and conversational patterns of interaction with their superiors and their peers alike. In the medical environment presented in the series, engaging in nagging, self-bashing and mordant denigration revolves around a powerful core of irony and/or sarcasm, which will be shown to constitute linguistic resources destined to foster proximity and consolidate friendship, despite potential damage to interlocutors' faces prompted by common expectations.

Exploring the above mentioned aspects of humorous conversations at work will be achieved via analysing two sets of excerpts from the TV series '*Grey's Anatomy'*. The first set of excerpts will concentrate on the contestive function of the humorous interventions as initiated by Dr Bailey, the chief resident in her conversations with her interns. This analysis will start from the already investigated premise that initiators of humorous dialogues are usually acknowledged to occupy higher hierarchical positions and to feel entitled to exert control over the interaction (Coser 1960 in Kotthoff 2006). By maneuvering humorous resources, the person who is in a position of authority is empowered to re-assert their position of superiority and control, to reinforce existing hierarchies and, finally, to relocate the conversational focus as they think fit.

The second set of dialogues will highlight the way humorous repartees blend scathing criticism with the expression of unbridled solidarity during several conversations exclusively unfolding among interns. Its analysis will exploit the already investigated premise that, as a rule, humour-permeated exchanges are likely to strengthen group cohesion and to preserve social harmony by alleviating the likelihood of emotional damage generally brought about by confrontational situations (Kotthoff 2003: 11).

2. Irony as avowal of attitude

Verbal irony is a linguistic phenomenon exploiting the incongruity between reality and expectation and consequently unveiling an attitude towards such an incongruity. It is of primordial importance to distinguish verbal irony from situational irony, defined as a state of

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the world which is normally perceived as ironical (Gibbs 1994). Both verbal and situational irony revolve around a juxtaposition of incompatibles and employ *incongruity* in order to suggest a *distinction between facts and expectations* (saying one thing and meaning another) while keeping in mind the audience's awareness of both. If situational irony foregrounds events which appear as ironic regardless of the speaker's implication, with verbal irony, the speaker creates a juxtaposition of incompatible actions or words with a view to conveying an attitude. Thus, while verbal irony is intentional and indicative of an attitude, situational irony cannot be said to reside in the speaker's intention of doing something ironic.

3. Recent views on irony processing

Concerning the way irony is processed, two main families of theories are noteworthy. On the one hand, some scholars (Grice 1975, Dews and Winner 1999) maintain that irony presupposes a two-stage processing: first, the processing of a meaning of a specific utterance is rejected and, subsequently, a reinterpretation of the utterance via inferring an implicature is triggered. On the other hand, relevance-centred views such as that promoted by Sperber and Wilson (1986) claim that ironic meaning is arrived at directly, without being mediated by way of some rejected interpretation.

3.1 Irony as conversational implicature and acknowledged pretense

In Grice's view, irony is a case of conversational implicature, engendered by a flouting of the Quality Maxim (Grice 1975: 46) which results in implying the opposite of what is said. The ironist says something s/he does not believe to be true although it is not in his/her intention to tell a lie. The intention conveyed by the ironist's implicature urges the hearer to look for an additional meaning: having identified the non-observance of the Quality Maxim, the addressee feels inclined to reject the literal meaning and to subsequently decipher the implied meaning, highly likely to be "some obviously related proposition. The most obviously related proposition is the contradictory of the one he purports to be putting forward" (Grice 1975: 53). In '*Further Notes on Logic and Conversation'* (1978) Grice broadens the definition of irony by incorporating the espousing of an attitude into it: "To be ironical is among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests) and while one wants the pretence to be recognized as such, to announce it as pretence would spoil the effect" (Grice 1978: 125). The claim that irony expresses an attitude on the part of the speaker significantly contributes to enriching the investigation into the processing of irony as a verbal resource meant to convey an evaluative stance on the part of the speaker.

3.2 Irony as a 'tinge' of affective meaning

In compliance with the Gricean claim that irony displays an attitude-related dimension, Dews and Winner (1995) propose the '*Tinge Hypothesis'* , which posits that irony 'mutes' the literal meaning of the ironical utterances, easily recognisable by the addressee as incongruent with the existing state-of-affairs. (Dews and Winner 1997: 1535). The literal meaning of an ironic utterance is activated initially, either before or simultaneously with the ironic meaning, and is retained in order to dilute either the criticism or the praise implied by it (Dews and Winner 1999: 1579). The diminishing or 'muting' effect resides in the manner in which the irony manages to color or 'tinge' the addresser's perception of the intended meaning, since:

> Irony mutes the evaluative meaning conveyed in comparison to literal language. In the case of ironic criticism, the positive meaning 'tinges' the negative intended meaning,

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> resulting in a less critical evaluation. Conversely, in the case of ironic praise, the literal negative meaning 'tinges' the positive intended meaning, resulting in a more critical evaluation (Dews and Winner 1999:1580)

Dews and Winner distinguish between two instances of irony: *ironic criticism*, in which the speaker says something positive to convey a negative attitude, such as

'Well done!

said to someone who has unwillingly stepped on one's toes,

and *ironic praise*, less common, in which the speaker says something negative to convey a positive attitude:

'That must be tough for you!'

to a friend who has been promoted and has received a considerable bonus.

3.3 Contradiction as a source of irony

Berntsen and Kennedy (1996) advocate that the attitude a speaker chooses to display by means of irony arises from the contradiction between the literal statement and what the addressee regards as the speaker's belief, be that detachment, contempt, restraint, arrogance or indignation.

> To produce a statement about a subject matter which opposes apparently indisputable knowledge or beliefs can be a way of displaying the subject matter is taken by the speaker to be amusing or ridiculous or absurd or beneath contempt, depending on the context. That is, the contrast between the literal statement and the shared background knowledge can be a way of specifying an attitude (Berntsen and Kennedy 1996: 21).

Bernsten and Kennedy (1996) endorse Kierkegaard's view on contradiction when they claim that irony involves an opposition or contradiction between a literal statement and what the receiver takes to be the sender's belief. Such a contradiction is expected to arouse a certain attitude on the part of the receiver, which is defined as "a kind of evaluation, dealing with feeling and affect, interests and ideas. An attitude is preconceptual because it is a stance taken towards an idea, rather than an idea per se" (Kierkegaard in Berntsen and Kennedy 1996: 16). Consequently, an addressee recognizes an utterance as ironical if he\she is aware that the speaker contradicts common knowledge or beliefs in order to express an attitude towards them and to specify that s/he considers them preposterous, hilarious or even pitiable.

3.4 Irony as 'Pretense'.

Clark and Gerrig's '*Pretense Theory*' (1984) claims that a person who uses an ironic utterance assumes a role and consequently borrows an ironic voice. The ironist does not only echo an interpretation s/he dissociates from, but equally *enact* the person to whom the respective thought or attitude is attributed:

> A speaker pretends to be an injudicious person, speaking to an uninitiated audience; the speaker intends the addressee of the irony to discover the pretense and thereby see his or her attitude toward the speaker, the audience and the utterance (Clark and Gerrig 1984: 12)

Whenever a speaker is being ironical she *pretends to be someone else*, addressing somebody else than the actual hearer. Consequently, two layers of meaning need to be

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processed in order to understand irony: *the layer of reality*, where the participants in conversation share some common knowledge, beliefs and suppositions, and *the layer of pretense*, where the participants assume different roles, pretending to be someone else. Recognition of incompatibility between the two layers and of the persona the speaker assumes to be facilitates recognition of irony:

> A listener's understanding of an ironic utterance depends crucially on the common ground he or she believes is shared by the ironist and the audience, their mutual beliefs, mutual knowledge and mutual suppositions (Clark and Gerrig 1984:124).

As soon as the hearer recognizes irony, s/he can engage in' *joint pretense*' pretense and assume a different persona, meant to be cooperative with the speaker's ironical voice.

3.6 Irony as interpretive resemblance

In their relevance-based approach to irony, Sperber and Wilson probe into the *processing* of irony as a "fallible process of hypothesis formation and evaluation" (1986: 271). In the case of irony, the participants' beliefs and attitudes are altered after verbal interaction, as interlocutors are likely to espouse new beliefs, as well as either discard or reinforce existing attitudes. Potential reasons justifying the speaker's dissociation from the opinion echoed may include:

a) the speaker may believe the opinion to be false and thus s/he implicates the opposite of what s/he says.

b) the speaker may not believe the echoed opinion is false, but intends to share the attitude that "to hold it or express it would be patently absurd" (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 267).

For an utterance to be understood appropriately, it must have one single interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, which needs be satisfactory both in terms of contextual effects and in terms of cognitive effort on the part of the language user. An optimally relevant interpretation brings about a noteworthy contextual effect against the minimal effort undertaken (Sperber and Wilson 1986: 268-274). Along this line of argument, to be fully grasped, irony needs to be assessed as an instance of *interpretive resemblance*, i.e. as a case of resemblance to the propositional content of the ironised utterance, which sounds incongruent or preposterous in the given context. Thus, verbal irony is "a variety of echoic interpretations, literal or non-literal, of an attributed thought or utterance." (Sperber and Wilson 1996: 169). Relying on the clues provided by the principle of relevance, the addressee is empowered to decide which set of assumptions the speaker wants to make manifest to him/her. Otherwise formulated, recognition of irony relies on inferencing and is shaped by the cognitive environment shared by the addresser and the addressee. Since it is intended to alter an interlocutor's cognitive environment and to generate a new set of manifest assumptions, irony results in displaying context-specific attitudes, shaped in relation to specific communicative goals.

3.7 The insincere core and the relevant inappropriateness of irony

Attardo's approach to irony is a hybrid between the Gricean model of mismatch between what is said and what is implied and Sperber and Wilson's notion of relevance Firstly, Attardo adjusts Grice's Cooperative Principle into what the calls the '*principle of least disruption'*. Considering that the ironic meaning is arrived at inferentially, Attardo's '*principle of least disruption'* is intended as a more comprehensive communicative principle,

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that tolerates violations on condition such violations require minimal cognitive effort. Starting from Grice's claim that "irony is intimately connected with the expression of a feeling, attitude, or evaluation" (1989: 53), Attardo argues that the expression of a speaker's attitude towards the ironical referent is necessarily context-dependent. In discussing the following example:

'I love children so'

Attardo comments as follows: "If one says 'I love children so' while disliking them, one is technically lying. However, para-linguistic signals (tone of voice, mimicry), may indicate deliberate and blatant non-observance of the Quality Maxim, while signalling such non-observance to the hearer(s). Then one is not 'really' lying, but rather being ironical "by implying something that sounds strikingly inappropriate, yet relevant enough to communicate an attitude, be it dissociation or jocularity" (Attardo 2000: 824).

In addition to emphasising the role played by intentionality, incongruity, pretense, Attardo insists on the interweaving between irony and insincerity. His position endorses Haverkate's (1990), in whose view "irony is the intentional expression of insincerity" (1990: 104). Not only does irony encompass a deliberate expression of unconcealed insincerity, but it equally alludes to "some prior expectation, norm, or convention that has been violated in one way or another" (1995: 53). Strikingly convincing is Attardo's example of the anti-immigrant utterance made by some Italian immigrant like himself:

'We should throw all these immigrants, legal or illegal, out of the US'

The hearer's awareness that Attardo is a legal alien residing in the US, coupled with the logical assumption that Attardo is unlikely to advocate something self-threatening, will entitle the hearer to believe that Attardo is echoing some anonymous yet typical American xenophobe, whose utterance sounds both inappropriate and relevant in a given context.

4. Humour, irony and sarcasm as linguistic resources at work

Irony-laden and sarcasm-permeated humour has been long acknowledged both as a psychological incentive and a resourceful linguistic strategy within communities of fellow workers. Relationships at work often revolve around the criticism and denigration ironical and sarcastic utterances usually engender or around the solidarity-boosting effect mockery and self-belittling frequently generate within groups of people who spend considerable time together, particularly under stressful conditions: "It is axiomatic that conversational humor is a highly valued art across societies. Indeed, in much of western civilization, humor is an essential ingredient of everyday interaction and socialization" (Boxer and Cortez-Conde 1997: 275).

Sarcastic irony particularly appeals to interlocutors who, during its processing, may feel challenged to engage in a battle of wits and to simultaneously acknowledge the interlocutor's ability to resort to resourceful bantering: "In informal humour, special contextualization procedures facilitate special cognitive inferencing processes which enable the joint production of activities such as mocking, parody, teasing, banter, narrating, fantastic or absurd fictionalization, tomfoolery, wisecracking, humorous irony, etc." (Kotthoff 2006: 7). The appropriate manipulation of cognitive and, affective and linguistic resources when participating in ingroup exchanges such as those previously enumerated by Kotthoff not only lead to amusement but are equally indicative of ingroup solidarity, as they heavily rely on the interlocutors' mutually accepted positioning with respect to each other, on their sense of proximity and/or distance, as well as on their mood and disposition. Ironical and sarcastic

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exchanges contribute to the moulding of the contextually-defined identities of the interlocutors, while concomitantly empowering them to achieve non-humorous social purposes, such as the making and unmaking of relationships in the workplace. *Grey's Anatomy* is a case in point, since humorous exchanges perform both 'supportive' and 'contestive' functions, which will be amply defined and illustrated in section 4.2.

4.1 Humorous exchanges as indicative of existing hierarchies

On their first day at work the interns are assigned to Dr. Miranda Bailey, nicknamed 'The Nazi' and are surprised to glimpse a sturdy, midgety, hostile-looking woman as their attendant. Dr. Bailey's sarcasm is one of her major conversation penchants and she makes use of it whenever she establishes the way her interns are supposed to relate to her. The outgoing enthusiastic Izzie Stevens tries to introduce herself, in order to establish a personal and professional rapport, an enterprise which fails lamentably:

(1)

> IZZIE: Hi. I'm Isabel Stevens but everyone calls me Izzie. *(She holds out her hand to shake Dr. Bailey's. Dr. Bailey just looks at her)* DR. BAILEY: I have 5 rules. Memorize them. Rule number 1. Don't bother sucking up. I already hate you, that's not gonna change. *(points to the desk)* Trauma protocol. Phone lists. Pagers. Nurses will page you." (Episode 1, 1st series)

Dr Bailey's refusal to shake Izzie's hand suggests blatant unwillingness to establish any rapport based on equality of status with the interns and preserve her authority, irrespective of such behaviour incurring the risk of sounding dictatorial. Her gesture is a straightforward refusal to cooperate with Izzie's bashful initiative to minimally socialize. At the same time, Bailey's reaction indicates a tendency to preserve her own face; she preserves her own dignity and authority, while patronizing the interns and not refraining from overtly declaring her totalitarian posture.

The target of her ridicule is not only Izzie, but all interns. Sarcasm is achieved through the overt avowal of disapproval of the interns' attempt to establish a friendly rapport with her. Her rules are enunciated as elliptical commands resembling those issued to remind children of their duties. Having thus infantilised her addressees, Bailey's expressive 'I already hate you, that's not gonna change' sounds like an ultimatum although it is uttered at the beginning of an allegedly long – term cooperation.

The way sarcastic irony is employed as a linguistic resource in this exchange is resonant with Coser's finding that while 'those low in the social hierarchy [...] make fewer witticisms', 'those 'on top' are freer to define situations' and, consequently, to initiate and maintain aggression. (Coser in Kotthoff 2003: 8-9). Dr. Bailey's sarcastic repartees prove to be what Kotthoff calls 'an aggressive form of irony' and is 'indicative of unequal power' (Schutte 1992: 336 in Kotthoff 2006: 11). Her comments are illustrative of Kotthoff's claim that 'sarcasm is at the same time a means of avoiding open confrontation and of securing cooperation in cases of conflicting interpretations and interaction expectations' (Kotthoff 2006: 11).

In excerpt (2), Dr Bailey is at the end of her tether while listening to the four interns' requests.

(2)
CRISTINA: If she gets to cut, I want to cut too.
IZZIE: Yeah me too.

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GEORGE: I wouldn't mind another shot. I mean if everybody else is.
DR. BAILEY: Stop talking. Every intern wants to perform their first surgery. That's not your job. Do you know what your job is? To make your resident happy. Do I look happy? No. Why? Because my interns are whining. You know what will make me look happy? Having the code team staffed, having the trauma pages answered, having the weekend labs delivered and having someone down in the pit doing the sutures! (Episode 2, 1st series)

The conversation evinces that, although Bailey disapproves of her interns' behavior, she may choose somebody to perform surgery. Unexpectedly enough, her monologue consists of redundant rhetorical questions: 'Do you know what your job is?', 'Do I look happy?', 'Why' and snappish tongue-in-cheek answers: 'To make your resident happy.' 'Because my interns are whining'. Dr. Bailey's sarcastic reply reinforces the hierarchical relationship between her and her interns. One source of her sarcasm is her choice of words: the verb 'whining' has a pejorative meaning, designating an activity which is highly inappropriate with surgical residents. Her first question 'Do you know what your job is?' is redundant because the interns obviously know what their job is. Bailey does not ask this question to remind them which their duty is but, once again, to infantilise them. She is treating them as if they were either small children or retarded people while bluntly stating the obvious: work-related issues always come first.

Bailey uses humor as a social management strategy, she emphasizes the interns' attitude as being childish while reprimanding them as to their lack of focus on other issues, and reinforces the existing hierarchy between the attendant and the interns. At the same time, she uses sarcasm to diffuse the tension which would have emerged if she had picked one of them to perform their first surgery. To alleviate the strain inherent in any competitive situation, Dr Bailey clearly states that the choice is not the interns' responsibility and they will benefit from equal odds. Her sarcasm-permeated intervention testifies to Kotthoff's claim that the avoidance of overt aggression may be paired with displaying competence in the verbal endeavour : "While it is typically considered impolite in many societies to humiliate others, humorous, indirect attacks are subtle ways of circumventing social rules of courtesy and much harder to respond to. After all, the humorous assault leaves room for the excuse that one did not mean to attack seriously" (Kotthoff 2006: 13).

The conversation below highlights Dr. Bailey's use of sarcasm while venting displeasure at her interns' sloth. Her disdain is best voiced in her mock imitation of simplistic commands similar to those addressed to children:

(3)

DR. BAILEY: Are we saving lives or having a tea party? Walk faster people. (Episode 3, 2nd series)

Her attitude is intended to sound over authoritative and rigid. The expression 'tea party' occurs again in the conversation below, when the interns lose focus on their jobs in order to admire Dr. Bailey's baby. Their attendant does not hesitate to reply:

(4)

All the interns are admiring Dr.Bailey's baby
DR. BAILEY: Okay this is not a tea party. Go work. Save some lives. *(They disperse quickly)* Now!

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Obviously, the expression 'tea party' is derogative: Bailey unhesitantly engages in belittling the situation as well as her interns' behavior by reminding them the obvious: they are at work, in a hospital and they seem to forget that. Moreover, her urge 'Save some lives' is essentially hyperbolic because used with a non-durative meaning: while sending them to work, Dr. Bailey overemphasizes the interns' weighty responsibility.

Transgressing Bailey's rules takes place when Cristina and Izzie decide to steal a body and perform an autopsy, disregarding the consequences of their actions. Dr Bailey, notices that the two young doctors are missing and she knows 'exactly where they are':

(5)

Cristina and Izzie are performing the autopsy when Bailey enters
BAILEY: Don't even tell me you're doing what I think you're doing!
CRISTINA: Um...
BAILEY: Not only did you disregard the family's wishes, you broke the law! You could be arrested for assault! Do you like jail? The hospital could be sued! I could lose my license, my job! I like my job! Did you think about any of this before you started cutting open a poor man's body? I could seriously kick both of your asses right now. Do you have anything to say?
(Izzie picks up Mr. Franklin's heart from the scales)
IZZIE: Look at his heart.
BAILEY: It's huge!
IZZIE: It's over 600 grams, and there's some kind of grainy material in it.
CRISTINA: We want to run some tests.
BAILEY: Oh, now you want to run tests?
CRISTINA: At this point, what could it hurt?
BAILEY: I hate both of you right now."(Episode 9, 1st series)

Bailey's reprimand is a series of sarcastic, rhetorical questions alternating with anger – venting exclamatives which show bleak scenarios likely to result from non–observance of hospital regulations: 'Do you like jail?...I like my job!' She deeply disapproves of the interns' misplaced and risky initiative by mercilessly uttering expressions of exasperation and grim prophecies. Again, Bailey uses humor as a social management procedure and makes Cristina and Izzie realize the serious consequences of their actions. "I hate both of you right now.' is a hyperbole by means of which Bailey sarcastically over-emphasizes her anger and disapproval, so as to persuade her interns that even if performing the autopsy turns out to be useful, she still strongly disapproves with their erratic behavior and is indignant at their initiative.

Nevertheless, Bailey is keen on preserving the reputation of the medical staff of Seattle Grace Hospital unblemished and her protective authority strengthens her bond with the interns, irrespective of her sarcastic and stern attitude towards them. Despite her empathetic bouts, Dr. Bailey preserves her sarcastic attitude whenever she interferes with the interns. This is the case when a man falls from the 5th floor in front of her intern George O'Malley and survives. The man dies on the hospital table shortly after his accident, without any reason.

(6)

DR. BAILEY: There'll be an autopsy. Sometimes people get on the table and they just die. There's no way of knowing beforehand and no way of controlling it.
GEORGE: But he fell five storeys and lived. It doesn't make any sense. He survived so I could go and find Daisy. And then she didn't even want to see him so what's the point?

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DR. BAILEY: We're all a part of the cosmic joke O'Malley. Now leave me alone. (Episode 8, 1st series)

Bailey's sarcastic remark 'we're all a part of cosmic joke' echoes George's utterance 'He survived so I could find Daisy'. Bailey echoes George's statement, expressing disapproval with the intern's belief in the wondrous workings of fate. 'Now leave me alone.' puts a brutal end to George's attempt of asking more questions or becoming too emotionally involved in this case. Her avowed lack of interest in a philosophic discussion is expressed by her wish to opt out of the talk: 'We're all a part of the cosmic joke O'Malley. Now leave me alone'. Bailey's sarcasm is meant to bring George's feet back on the ground and relinquish his fatalistic view.

To conclude, whenever she is not being sarcastic or indignant with the faulty performance of her interns, Miranda Bailey consistently preserves an impersonal intonation, which rules out the likelihood of intimacy. Her sarcasm is a social management tool, which she wields masterfully, so as to emphasise professional hierarchies and to avoid useless emotional waste by engaging in 'contestive humour'.

4.2 Irony and sarcasm among peers: intern(al) humor

Frequently enough, teasing and joking are means of social identity display and of social bonding among co-workers. Verbal and situational humor as well as conversational joking may engender conflict or may control and prevent clashes. Research on humour at the workplace has shown that spontaneous humour fosters creativity and defuses conflicts.

In addition to amusing and entertaining, humour may also serve to construct and maintain solidarity, or to hedge face threatening acts such as directives, criticisms, and insults (Kotthoff 19962003 In interactions where power is particularly salient, however, humour may be used repressively by the powerful to maintain authority and control, as well as by subordinates to subvert that control, while voicing criticism in a socially acceptable form (Holmes 2006: 29)

While delineating social identity, humour equally serves to foster social proximity and to reaffirm in-group solidarity (Boxer and Cortes-Conde 1997: 275-277). What Holmes calls 'jointly constructed or conjoint humor' (Holmes 2006: 33) is a highly cooperative exchange, meant not only to enhance ease and laidbackness, but to consolidate solidarity and a sense of belonging among members of a specific group.

According to Holmes, there are two major instantiations of conjoint humour: supportive humour and contestive humour. "In constructing supportive humour, the participants cooperate in various ways to strengthen a claim, elaborate a picture, or emphasise a point' (Holmes 2006: 34). Complaining about sleeplessness, doubting their capacity as surgeons, harbouring doubts as to their professional survival are irony- and sarcasm-tinged encounters among interns are strategies meant to assert professional status and belonging as well as affective stances established among the interns as a clearly (self)acknowledged group. On the other hand, group cohesion is, paradoxically enough, both challenged and revitalised by means of what Holmes calls 'contestive humor': "Contestive humour typically involves contributions, which challenge each other. Most obviously, the contribution of one participant challenges the accuracy or validity of the claims or assumptions made by a previous contributor" (Holmes 2006: 34). Exchanges among interns are replete with instances of contestive humor, from nonchalant tiffs to nerve-racking battles of wits.

Boxer and Cortes-Conde distinguish between three types of supportive humor: *teasing*, *joking* about an absent other and *self-denigrating* humor. Teasing implies the presence of the person targeted by conversational joking: This person, be it either the addressee or a

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participant in the conversation immediately becomes the focus of all locators. As Boxer and Cortes-Conde claim, "Teasing runs along a continuum of bonding to nipping to biting. because this is a continuum, these constructs are not mutually exclusive and the boundaries are not always clear" (Boxer and Cortes–Conde 1997: 279). Teasing is a way of releasing pressure in a non-menacing manner, although it may also indicate pent-up aggressive drives.

When joking about absent others, the members of the conversation "unite in a clear bond" (Boxer and Cortes–Conde 1997: 280). Joking at the expense of an absent person is regarded as safer than teasing since its satirical effect is less likely to arouse hostility or make the others feel uncomfortable. In addition, "There is less ambiguity and the bond is clearer" (Boxer and Cortes–Conde 1997: 280).

In terms of safety and face-preserving, self-denigrating humor, although seemingly threatening to the addresser's own face, places the speaker at the center of the verbal play, since "[b]y complaining about one's own physical, emotional or intellectual shortcomings, speakers show themselves self-effacing, allowing the addressee to perceive them as approachable" (Boxer and Cortes–Conde 1997: 281). With self-targeted irony accompanied by self-denigration, the speaker is both the initiator and the referent of humor. While conversational joking has the main role of strengthening social bonds while self – teasing not only deliberately displays the speaker's identity, but equally accelerates bonding among participants.

One of the most amusing scenes unfolds when one of the interns is chosen to perform his first surgery, closely supervised by the attendants. All interns are crammed in the observation deck above the O.R. to watch George performing an appendectomy for the first time. This is the first time when the interns act as an in-group, taking into account lack of professional experience associated with a propensity to turn insecure George into the butt of their injokes:

(7)

Camera pans to observation deck above the O.R where interns have gathered to watch George help with the surgery.
INTERN #1: He's gonna faint. He's a fainter.
INTERN #2: Nah code brown. Right in his pants.
INTERN #1: He's all about the flop sweat. He's gonna sweat himself unsterile.
INTERN #3: 10 bucks says he messes up the McBurney.
CRISTINA: 10 says he cries.
INTERN #2: I'll put 20 on a total meltdown.
MEREDITH: 50 says he pulls the whole thing off. *(All the interns stare at Meredith)* That's one of us down there. The first one of us. Where's your loyalty?
(Everyone is quiet for a bit)
CRISTINA: 75 says he can't even I.D the appendix.
IZZIE: I'll take that action. (Episode 1, 1st series)

During this conversation, sarcasm is directed at an absentee: George is down in the O.R. and cannot hear his colleagues' sarcastic bets. However, he can feel the high pressure of being in the center of the attention, knowing that his reputation is at risk and that his image as perceived by the other interns and the residential doctors depends on his performing the appendectomy according to satisfactory professional standards. The interns on the observation deck clearly bond while betting on George's allegedly clumsy attempt to overcome first surgery fright. Meredith is the only supportive intern, reminding the others of their own lack of experience and emphasising that mocking at another inexperienced intern is not only

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inappropriate but anunethical. She is trying to redress George's damaged face by means of a positive politeness strategy. Predictably enough, George's face is seriously damaged when he messes up the surgery. Discouraged, he looks for compassion among the other interns (Cristina, Meredith, Izzie, Alex) and he finally resorts to self – denigrating humor:

(8)

GEORGE: Maybe I should've gone into geriatrics. No one minds when you kill an old person.

George is not the only intern who seriously doubts his professional abilities after his first 48 – hour shift at Seattle Grace Hospital. Together with their attendant's strictness, exhaustion contributes to the feeling of inadequacy and they tend to believe that they could do better in other fields. When she questions her ability to become a good surgeon Meredith uses irony in a self-deprecating manner.

(9)

MEREDITH: I wish I wanted to be a chef. Or a ski instructor. Or a kindergarten teacher.
GEORGE: You know I would've been a really good postal worker. I'm dependable. *(Meredith chuckles)* You know my parents tell everyone they meet that their son's a surgeon. As if it's a big accomplishment. Superhero or something. … If they could see me now.

After 48 exhausting working hours, any other profession Meredith may envisage (chef, ski instructor, kindergarden teacher) is likely to bring her peace of mind and fulfilment. George is being supportive and when mentioning he would make a good postal worker, he uses irony to pinpoint that allegedly lesser jobs might compensate for the traumatic experience of endless shifts. His self-ironising remark arouses Meredith's laughter. Self – denigration involves identity display: both interns admit lack of self-confidence and question their medical abilities while bonding and achieving social proximity.

The irony-laden and sarcasm-permeated verbal interactions between the interns unveil a wide array of feelings: sympathy, curiosity, annoyance. A rapport of mutual dislike soon emerges between Cristina, one of the most competitive interns, proud to be a Stanford valedictorian and Alex Karev, a shallow, rather misogynistic, self-centred playboy. The interaction below is illustrative of their mutual dislike:

(10)

CRISTINA: I have a BA from Smith, a PhD from Berkeley and a MD from Stanford and I'm delivering lab results. It'll take me all day to get through these.
(Bailey and cocky intern Alex approach from down the hall. Bailey overhears the last of Cristina's sentence)
DR. BAILEY: Then get started.
CRISTINA: Oh, ah I wasn't complaining. I, I …
DR. BAILEY *(interrupts):* Intern was reassigned. So he's mine now. Have him hadow you for the day. Show him how I do things.
(Bailey walks off)
ALEX *(holds out his hand):* Alex Karev, nice to meet you.

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CRISTINA *(shakes his hand):* The pig who called Meredith the nurse. Yeah. I hate you on principle.
(She starts heading down the hall. Alex follows leaving George standing by himself)
ALEX: And you're the pushy overbearing kiss ass. I, ah hate you too.
CRISTINA: Oh it should be fun then. (Episode 2, 1st series)

The situational irony (an outstanding medical student delivering labs) is augmented when the attendant overhears her remark and suggests she should get started. Cristina takes great pride in her Stanford diploma and she finds it hard to stoop to delivering labs. 'Alex Karev, nice to meet you' sounds ruthlessly ironic in the context of Cristina's reputation being threatened by Dr. Bailey. Cristina's utterance is an expression of poorly concealed contempt when identifying Alex: 'The pig who called Meredith the nurse. Yeah. I hate you on principle.' Cristina does not hesitate to call him an unflattering name. Without delay, Alex insults cristina back while avowing utter dislike ('And you're the pushy overbearing kiss ass. I, ah hate you too'). Cristina's concluding remark ('Oh it should be fun then.') suggests detachment while it does not necessarily perform a distancing function: explicitness may sometimes foster social proximity despite acknowledgement of mutual dislike.

In episode 9, 1st series George gets a sexually transmitted disease. Letting the others know that he has syphilis is embarrassing for him and his positive face is severely damaged when he finds out that all the interns know about his illness:

(11) *They sit down at a table with Cristina and Izzie.*

CRISTINA: Hey, syph-boy.
GEORGE: You told her?
IZZIE: Just Cristina.
ALEX: 'Syph-boy.' It's got a nice ring to it, it's kinda like Superboy, only diseased.
CRISTINA: Izzie didn't have to say a word. Around here, the only thing that spreads faster than disease is gossip.
GEORGE: That's not true. Just cause Izzie can't keep her mouth shut doesn't mean everyone knows.
(Meredith enters)
MEREDITH: Hey, George. How are you feeling? Sorry about the syphilis.
GEORGE: Everyone in this hospital knows?
ALEX: Knows you're a player. (Episode 9, 1st series)

Given their familiarity, Cristina does not hesitate to mock George by addressing him as 'syph –boy'. She labels him according to the embarrassing disease he has, which is blatantly offending. Alex Karev joins her in proffering ironical comments on the expression 'syph – boy', which is derisively contrasted with 'Superboy' The mockingly mitigating expression 'only diseased' mockingly belittles the importance of George's ailment and shows mock pity at George's expense. George tries to preserve his face while inquiring about the source of the gossip. Meredith's sincere expression of compassion does not comfort George, who suspiciously wonders whether there is anyone who does not know about his disease.

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4.3 Findings

Having analysed the above conversations, I have validated my initial assumptions that humourous exchanges in *Grey's Anatomy* fulfil specific social functions along two main directions:

1) consolidation of existing hierarchical order. The person who occupies a higher position (in this case, br Miranda Bailey) feels fully entitled to exert humour in a contestive way, questioning abilities, criticising performances, altering the social and conversational context, swerving communicative focus and turning situational tables. While wielding humorous resources, the authority is empowered to fully exert control and restriction and to re-affirm hierarchical priorities
2) consolidation of social bonds and of ingroup appurtenance. Humorous conversations among the interns are a rewarding verbal resource meant to exhibit social identity and to establish professional and personal rapports. Sarcastic irony, teasing and mocking constitute linguistic resources which generate 'supportive' rather than 'contestive' humour. The young doctors' constant proximity fosters humorous exchanges, from mild reprimand to scathing sarcasm, meant to helps them clarify work – related issues and confess work – related frustrations, vent their fears of failure in their jobs as well as bond and subsequently cement such bonds or rescue them from severing.

To conclude, humorous exchanges enable precise and powerful delineations of each protagonist's identity, taking into account that " Spontaneous, collaborative humour also provides an excellent illustration of the way participants in workplace interaction use discourse to construct different aspects of their identity (Holmes 2006: 27). If supportive humour consolidates the professional status of the young doctors and their appurtenance to a self-acknowledged group of professionals harbouring a considerable degree of self-esteem, contestive humour challenges any potential congealing into a self-complacent professional positioning while fostering ceaseless comparison among peers, ruthless self-evaluation and questioning previously reached conclusions as to one's professional value and social meaningfulness. The strategic and innovative use of irony- and sarcasm-permeated humour in *Grey's Anatomy* brings linguistic evidence in favour of the common belief that the medical profession requires uncommon competitiveness and unparallelled assertiveness.

Daniela Sorea
University of Bucharest - Faculty of Foreign Languages and Literatures
English Department
danasorea06@gmail.com

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