Sitcoms and language and culture acquisition

Abstract

By Marija Krsteva, PhD

Goce Delcev University – Stip, North Macedonia

e-mail: marija.krsteva@ugd.edu.mk

Tel +38971616044

This paper analyzes the role and place of the sitcoms in the process of language and culture acquisition. The sitcoms are genre that mainly uses humor for entertainment whole also containing real-life situations with realistic and everyday conversations, using an effective language for communication. The viewers, although not directly involved in the scenes, could easily be perceived as passive participants in those conversations, thus personally living the situations and adopting the language used by the actors. By drawing on Claire Kramsch's (1998) idea that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality and Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis that language affects the thought process, i.e. the principle of linguistic relativity to illustrate the way in which language influences people's thought and behavior, this paper illustrates the diverse and complex way in which sitcoms play a major role in foreign language and culture acquisition or the languaculture.

Key words: sitcoms, language acquisition, culture acquisition, cultural reality

The genre of the situation comedy, or the sitcom, is a multifaceted arena of investigation that has been until recently neglected lacking the attention from various scientific fields such as film, media, narrative and cultural studies. Moreover, the genre that has been part of media production and viewers' attention for almost a century offers a broad field of investigation in different spheres of social, artistic and cultural life globally. It holds a unique place and role into shaping the world of media and culture as a result. The key feature of the sitcom lies in its effect. Therefore, a compelling and critical study of the genre is of paramount importance in order to reveal the important topics related to sitcoms as an artistic and media product of mass consumption. A wide range of perspectives can be employed in analyzing the sitcom reaching different purposes and conclusions.

In this respect, this study draws a specific connection between the sitcom as a media product and the processes of language acquisition and culture adoption. The main hypothesis is that while sitcoms are genre that mainly uses humor for entertainment, they also contain real-life situations with realistic and everyday conversations, using an effective language for communication. The viewers, although not directly involved in the scenes, could easily be perceived as passive participants in those conversations, thus personally "living" in the situations and adopting the language used by the actors/characters. It is the actors' talent and ability to deliver the character that further influences how the sitcom will be adopted.

Furthermore, while these encounters with the foreign language and culture are in an informal setting, the acquisition of the content is undisputable. A simple proof of how much the sitcoms participate in the viewers lives is their popularity on social media. Fan pages, videos, reels and memes have all been dedicated to particular scenes, lines and moments from different sitcoms. The dedication to the sitcom and the connection it forms with the audience can be seen in a simple post, a video or a picture and the comments following it on the social media.

The unique contribution of the research lies in the connection between culture language and thought drawing primarily on two main theoretical claims. Firstly, the research will rely on Claire Kramsch's (1998) idea that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. Secondly, the research relies on Sapir-Whorf's hypothesis that language affects the thought process, i.e. the principle of linguistic relativity to illustrate the way in which language influences people's thought and behavior. The main connection with the research is made in the point that the sitcoms present social reality of English speakers (people living in English speaking countries) and as Edward Sapir claims "speakers of different languages perceive the world differently because of the ways in which language influences a person's thinking and behavior". We will prove how re-living social situations in sitcoms lets viewers immerse in the social reality and pick up the language units. This idea will further be developed along the lines of Benjamin Lee Whorf's claims who developed Edward Sapir's ideas and proposed a linguistic relativity, i.e. "since languages differ in grammatical structures, in linguistic categories, and in other ways, Sapir and Whorf concluded that the speakers of different languages have different ways of viewing the world. Language serves as a filter of its speakers' perceptions and influences the way that a cultural group categorizes experience. After his studies, B. Whorf set forth a double principle: "the principle of linguistic determinism, namely, that way one thinks is determined by the language one speaks, and the principle of linguistic relativity, that differences among languages must therefore be reflected in the differences in the worldviews of their speakers" (Salzmann et al., 2012, p. 230 cited in Chodzkiene 2014:39). According to the linguistic determinist view, language structure controls thought and cultural norms. "Each of us lives not in the midst of the whole world but only in that part of the world that our language permits us to know. Thus, our knowledge of the world to a large extent is predetermined by the language of our culture. The differences between languages represent basic differences in the worldview of diverse cultures." (Chodzkiene 2014:39). The sitcoms give real life situations that are re-lived by the viewers and as a result, they pick up the language and discourse used there.

A sitcom or a situation/al comedy is a television program of the genre of comedy with a set time-frame of usually half an hour with a set cast of characters and location, usually a household or a workplace. Following the same initial idea and purpose of the show is part of the product's nature. In this, sitcoms are different from sketch comedy where a troupe may use different character for a different sketch, or a stand-up comedy where a comedian entertains the audience telling jokes and stories. In the sitcom, although characters may strive to change they are in a sense doomed to return each time to somewhere close to their starting point. Hence, the sitcom is merely providing a simple and reassuring

problem/solution formula while the audiences are reassured rather than challenged or forced to reexamine their values.

Sitcoms can further be classified according to the program's production format, they can be recorded in front of a studio audience or the live studio audience can be imitated or enhanced by the use of a laugh track. The type of camera setup and the new audiovisual advancements can also make a difference in the character of the sitcom. According to the American Film Academy, many contemporary sitcoms like the sitcoms of the past use the single-camera setup and do not feature a laugh track, thus often resembling the dramedy shows of the 1980s and the 1990s rather than the traditional sitcom. Unlike single-camera sitcoms of the past, nearly all contemporary comedies shot in this way are produced without a lough track. The genre of the comedy drama or also known as dramedy combines elements of comedy and drama. The modern, scripted television examples tend to have more humorous bits than simple comic relief seen in a typical hour-long legal or medical drama but exhibit far fewer jokes per minute as in a typical half-hour sitcom. Examples of these involve *Desperate Housewives, Sex and the City* and *Suits.*

The terms "situation comedy" or "sitcom" became commonly known in the 1950s. Prior examples involve appearances on the radio. Since this study is dedicated to sitcoms in English coming from and representing English-speaking countries, we'll briefly review the appearance and evolution of such sitcoms. The sitcom format was born in January 1926 with the initial broadcast of Sam n' Henry on WGN radio in Chicago. Sitcoms became a staple in broadcasting. US director and produces William Asher has been credited with being the "man who invented the sitcom" having directed over two dozen of the leading sitcoms, including I Love Lucy from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Like any other work of art, as a narrative structure and media product, pragmatically, structurally, stylistically or semiotically the sitcom can be subject of various analysis and each analyzed example can bring new and specific insights to the discussion.

Language, culture, thought

The present analysis tries to establish two main claims: the first one is that sitcoms within their cultural and linguistic outreach make a convergence between real and fictional play and perceptions, thus confirming Claire Kramsch's idea that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality. The second claim is the confirmation that language affects thought process i.e. the Sapir-Whorf's the principle of linguistic relativity in which language influences people's thoughts, worldview and behavior.

As Kramsch (1998:3) points, the three aspects of the connection between culture and language come from the following. Firstly, as she claims, people use words to express facts, ideas and events that they have learned and perceived while living as part of a community, at the same time, authors of texts express their attitudes, beliefs, points of view, namely, language expresses cultural realty; secondly, members of a community not only express experience, but they also create experience through language (Kramsch 1998:3). "The way in which people use the spoken, written or visual medium itself, creates meanings that are understandable to the group they belong to, for example, through a speaker's tone of voice,

accent, conversational style, gestures and facial expressions. Through all its verbal and non-verbal aspects, language embodies cultural reality. Finally, language is a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value. Speakers identify themselves with others through their use of language; they view languages as a symbol of their social identity. The prohibition of its use is often seen as a rejection of their social group and their culture. Thus, we can say that language embodies culture." (Kramsch 1998:3).

Language is born within culture and culture is built upon language. In other words, both language and culture create the reality of human communication. As immensely broad concepts, both culture and language have been and are still being defined in light of new developments in the humanities. Chodzkiene (2014) outlines the wide varieties of definitions surrounding the concepts of culture:

> It might be thought that culture is everything and everywhere. Indeed, some approaches to the study of culture take such a position, especially, for instance, those coming at the topic from a more anthropological point of view. Thus, the 19th century anthropologist Edward Tylor (1871) famously defined culture as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". This definition underlines the pervasiveness of culture in social life. It also emphasizes that culture is a product of humans living together and that it is learned. (In Chodzkiene 2014:103).

As concluded in foreword of the selected writings of Whorf Language, Thought and Reality (2nd edition), "Whorf derives the 'linguistic relativity principle' which means in informal terms, that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars towards different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observations" (282-283). He based this on the following premises from his writings in the above edition:

> 1.   Though and perception have a certain independence from language (207-209); 2. Nevertheless, some aspects of thinking are deeply interconnected with language and the concepts it provides (84-87); 3. Some of these interconnections are backgrounded because the concepts are implicit in grammatical distinctions. Some grammatical concepts are especially covert in that they do not have direct exponents in surface forms, Such concepts may highlight specific precepts (eg. number or shape of referents) and group them at the expense that may be prominent in other languages (116-119); 4. Nevertheless, such grammatical concepts especially when they are covert exist beyond our conscious awareness and may influence our classifications and reactions (133-134, 174); 5. These grammatical distinctions form an interconnecting web of concepts, which may be represented in a partial or fragmented way (187-90), a particular take on perceptual world associated with a language and culture; 6. The ways in which languages offer different such takes makes them invaluable correctives to our commonsense views about the nature of human experience (313-314).(Whorf: Foreword).

Sitcoms and the languaculture

Sitcom's ultimate effect on its viewers is communicative immersion, especially when it comes to language learners. "Communication is any means by which a thought is transferred from one person to another. Communication is the interchange of thoughts, opinions or information by speech, writing or signs (verbal and non-verbal) [...] Our communication skills, or the lack of them could spell the difference between success and failure in many of the things we do. One of the significant elements of success in the modern world is skill in effective communication" (Manoharan 2008:37). The acquisition of communication skills then as a complex set of skills requires mastering the languaculture of the target language. As already mentioned, the American anthropologist Michael Agar (1995) first coined the term languaculture to denote the connection between language and culture, meaning that language comprises grammar and vocabulary, past knowledge local and cultural information habits and behaviours. One may have the knowledge in grammar and vocabulary but needs to practice the conversational English to train the ear. Following the on-screen dialogues of the sitcom the viewers remove the barriers, both when they hear what is spoken to them and when they have to reply appropriately. The sitcom enables the learner to better recognize the situation, learn the material and visualize themselves when using the language in a similar situation.

These situations, building the comedy show, have also been recognized by the audiovisual translators as key representations of reality. "With the advent of sound, the 'default conventions' of cinematic representation favoured editing practices aiming at self-effacing presentational style with the goal to create an illusionistic effect of realism in order to keep viewers absorbed in the on-screen narrative. Much of the linguistic make-up of filmic dialogue is strictly dependent on this principle." (Ranzato&Zanotti 2018: *Introduction*).

The claim that "telecinematic texts have been and still are chief players in the construction of linguistic and cultural identities (Kozloff 2000; Bleichenbacher 2009; Jaeckie 2013)" in (Ranzato&Zanotti 2018: *Introduction*), attests to sitcom's role in language and culture acquisition.

An interesting aspect of comparison in this respect is the adoption of the languaculture by children who are watching animated cartoons in the target language. Cartoon characters are recognizable almost immediately by children whether nationally or internationally when used as motifs for different commercial products. A whole industry gets to be developed by a specific brand of cartoon characters children grew up with across the world. Clothes, food products, school utensils, hygiene products often bear the name and picture of a certain cartoon character. Similarly, children get involved in the animated motion picture getting to know the different characters, what they do and say. The development of television entertainment provided for separate channels dedicated only to cartoons or children entertainment which children can watch in different languages. As a result, children identify and later imitate their favorite characters in their play with their friends, often repeating lines from the episodes they see. A separate study dedicated to this process and degree of acquisition can be made for both pre-school children and for children already studying the foreign language. In his study *Well I Never!: Formulaic language as a Pragmatic Resource in*

Child Entertainment Media, Richard Nightingale looks into the potential for exposure to Situation-Bound Utterances (SUBs) in English language entertainment media for young children. By proposing that such media content bounds in authentic, contextualized texts he maintains that they provide knowledge of pragmatic conventions thorough "simultaneous provisions of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic contexts" (Gabrys- Barker&Wojtaszcek Ed. 2014:209). His two main research question involve whether children cartoons contain SBUs and if they do whether the pragmatic form is the same in the original and dubbed versions. The key aspect here is the SBU, as a "specific type of formulaic language. Kecskes, who coined the term, describes SBUs as 'highly conventionalized prefabricated pragmatic units whose occurrence is tied to standardized communicative situations' (2000:606). The defining feature of SUBs is their 'obligatoriness' and 'predicatability' in specific social interactions. In earlier research Kecskes argued that pragmatic functions are not encoded in SBUs themselves instead they are 'charged' by the situation in which they are use;" (Gabrys- Barker&Wojtaszcek Ed. 2014:204). SUBs are characterized as dynamic depending on the communicative behavior in a particular situation as "defined by societal conventions and rules" (Gabrys- Barker&Wojtaszcek Ed. 2014:209). The study gives qualitative data on the above by examining the texts in two British children cartoons: *Peppa Pig* and *Charlie and Lola*. The approach and the results of this study can serve to further examine the cognitive process of acquiring and adopting the content by the children who are exposed to it. By looking into that process we can reflect on the similar sitcom languaculture and its adoption by adults or young-adult students in this case. The fact that the language and the culture are received by seeing and hearing the language and culture in a form of an audiovisual material is the same for the two groups, but the cognitive process is preconditioned by age and the level of understanding differentiates the role of the audio-visual material for the two groups.

Presentation of a sitcom languaculture

To illustrate the cultural topics/language duality, a corpora of movie lines (the film script) from the sitcom *Seinfeld* will be given. The repeated exhibition of beliefs, behavior, social practices and attitudes in the sitcom becomes cultural patterns. These are reinforced by visual gags, parody, running gags, misunderstanding, parody, self-irony etc.). The narratives can also be analyzed from perspective of stylistic devices, cultural references, humor, context and socio-critical references. A closer analysis can look into the intra-linguistic and extra-linguistic culture-bound references, the former representing idioms, proverbs, slang and dialects and the latter refers to a linguistic expression that refers to a culture-bound referent, which is familiar to the audience by their cultural or encyclopedic knowledge (Pedersen 2005:2). For example, the Spanish word *paella*, meaning a rice dish with several types of meat is an extratextual culture-bound reference. The scope of this study will concentrate on the linguistic thematic units and their appeal to the reader to provoke interest and consequently culture and language acquisition.

Seinfeld

Although first started to be the "comedy about nothing" *Seinfeld* seems to be never boring, on the contrary, it has reached a never decreasing appeal across time and places worldwide. As an American television sitcom created by Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld *Seinfeld* aired on

NBC from 1989 to 1998, for nine seasons of 180 episodes. The show's ensemble cast stars Seinfeld as a fictionalized version of himself and focuses on his personal life with three of his friends: best friend George Costanza (Jason Alexander), former girlfriend Elaine Benes (Julia Louis-Dreyfus), and neighbor from across the hall, Cosmo Kramer (Michael Richards). Seinfeld is set mostly in an apartment building in Manhattan's Upper West Side in New York City. It has been described as often focusing on the minutiae of daily life it illustrates the life and relations in the big city. There are inserts moments of stand-up comedy in earlier episodes, from the fictional Jerry Seinfeld, the episode's events frequently serving as inspiration. As a rising comedian in the late 1980s, Jerry Seinfeld was presented with an opportunity to create a show with NBC. Together with Larry David, a fellow comedian and friend they create a premise for a sitcom. The series was produced by West-Shapiro Productions and Castle Rock. *Seinfeld* is widely regarded as one of the greatest and most influential shows of all time substantially impacting following sitcom productions. For over thirty years since its initial production and despite the world wide web intervention, Seinfeld's processing of the topics is as relevant today as it was when it first appeared.

The dynamic of the characters in anything but ordinary, or better yet, extraordinarily ordinary. One of the central aspects of the sitcoms is how they treat love relationships. Similarly with many other sitcoms, the characters got through a number of emotional encounters but none seems to work out. A steady relationship somehow never seems to be their agenda, unlike the examples in later friend-related sitcoms such as *Friends* and *How I Met Your Mother*. Equally, the three sitcoms exhibit an unusual tolerance between friends.

Another specific aspect of the *Seinfeld* are the inevitable allusions to the cosmopolitan life of New York and America. Different ethnicities and types of people and characters are shown. Moreover, *Seinfed* abounds in refences to world places, people and events. Although far from exhaustive, this study offers a list of such examples. The addition to these allusions attests to the attitude and the knowledge of the Americans about the rest of world. At the same time, they prove an interesting aspect for the viewers worldwide when in addition to the American culture an aspect of another region or culture is mentioned and they can recognize it. Usually these are stereotypical and comical mentions that add color to the sitcom narrative.

Text	Linguistic/cultural explanation
Informal language (slang, taboo, swearing)	
"Benes . My last name is Benes you jackass . Yeah" S8E5	In this scene, Kramer tries to help Elaine by entering the doctor's office and asking for her medical chart. While devising their plan, he fails to remember her surname correctly so she shouts at him about not knowing something like that about his long-time friend.
"I hate it! Oh, go to hell!" S8E17	Elaine is the only one who doesn't like the movie "The English Patient". Realizing that this can get into her way at work, and she could be "shunned", she tries to give it a chance. While at the cinema with her boss,

	she cannot handle it anymore and bursts out from the audience.
"You know, it's amazing Peterman hasn't fired that dolt." S8E15	During an attempt to avoid criticism at Elaine's work, a misunderstanding with persons and names occurs. Mistaking Elaine for a person named Susie, Elian's co-worker, Peggy, comments about Elaine in front of "Susie" (who is actually Elaine).
Neutral and formal language	
"Cause I'm an idiot! You may think you're an idiot, but with all due respect - I'm a much bigger idiot than you are." S2E5	Jerry complains about making a mistake by telling Elaine about an empty apartment in the building, telling George what an idiot he was to do that, while George replies that he is the one that holds that title.
"But I digress. Let me see, now" S6E10	Jerry and George arrange a meeting at Monk's to fool Duncan Meyer and to prove Jerry did not get a head start on the race. They pretend to meet after a very long time and George reminiscences about the past.
"Would you care to join us?" S4E16	Jerry invites a woman to have a coffee with him and his gang at the café.
Figurative language (metaphors, punning, irony, sarcasm, parody, allusions)	
"She can bring home the bacon and fry it in the pan" S8E2	Kramer is smitten by a woman who comes to visit Jerry and potentially date him.
"I could spot that bird's nest two blocks away" S6E16	Jerry comments on George's toupee, while George complains about another being "fixed up" with a woman who is bald.
"What do you mean, you snubbed her?" S4E16	Kramer meets one of Jerry's ex-girlfriends, not knowing how to react, he is being rude.

Table 1. Excerpts from *Seinfeld*

Conclusion

The units are discussed in terms of their verbal and non-verbal aspects. The verbal elements include informal language, slang, colloquialisms, compounds, collocations, taboo and swearing, irony, sarcasm, idioms, euphemisms, metaphors, intertextual referents etc. The non-verbal include description of the setting and cultural background. Furthermore, the introductory music themes also correspond with the overall dynamics between the characters and the rhythm of their dialogues and actions.

The sitcoms are built on verbal communication: "The spoken utterance is the original type of verbal communication. The meaning conveyed in spoken language can be specified by the means of voice, volume, intonation or pauses. According to the insights expressed by A. C. Wintergerst and J. McVeigh: Spoken language is relatively informal, repetitive and interactive. Speakers may use long pauses and talk over or interrupt each other. Written language is relatively formal, more concise and less repetitive (2011, p. 11)." (In Chodzkiene 2014:44).

The present study confirmed the above claims on language embodying the culture and vice versa as manifested in the natural process of language and culture acquisition via the sitcom. The sitcom narrative, structure, organization and overall invention innately transfers the information on language and culture in the combined form of the languaculture. Therefore, the sitcom is a cultural and linguistic media next to its entertainment purpose.

References

Alamer Abdullah, Almulhim Fahad (2021). The Interrelation Between Language Anxiety and Self-Determined Motivation; A Mixed Methods Approach *Frontiers in Education* Vol. 6 https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2021.6186 DOI=10.3389/feduc.2021.618655.

Chodzkiene, L. (2014) *What every student should know about intercultural communication*. –Vilniaus universitetas: Vilnius.
Cimasko, Tony and Reichelt, Melinda. (2011) *Foreign Language Writing Instruction: Principles and Practices*. Stany Zjednoczone: Parlor Press, LLC.
Gabryś-Barker, D., & Wojtaszek, A.S. (2014). Studying second language acquisition from a qualitative perspective. New York: Springer.

Kramsch, C. (1993) *Context and Culture in Language Teaching.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Kramsch, C. J. (1998). *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Morreale J. (2003). *Critiquing the Sitcom : A Reader. 1st ed*. Syracuse N.Y: Syracuse University Press.
Ranzato, I. and Zanotti, S. (eds.) (2018). *Linguistic and cultural representation in audiovisual translation*. London: Routledge.

Whorf, B.L. (2012). *Language, thought, and reality: selected writings*. Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology: Cambridge, Mass.

Pedersen, J. (2005) How is culture rendered in subtitles? In S. Nauert (ed.) Proceedings of the Marie Curie Euroconferences 'MuTra: Challenges of Multidimensional Effects of Substituting Cultural References in Subtitling 47 Translation', Saarbru¨ cken, 26 May 2005. www.euroconferences.info/proceedings/ 2005_Proceedings/2005_Pedersen_Jan.pdf.