

# Monty Python for Teaching Pragmatic Awareness

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Pragmatic competence is an important aspect of language learning, since native speakers seem less forgiving of L2 learners' pragmatic failures than they are of lapses in grammar or vocabulary (Crandall & Basturkmen, 2004). This paper demonstrates how two TV shows (*Monty Python's Flying Circus* and *Fawlty Towers*) can be used to humorously illustrate pragmatic (in)competence. Selected scenes demonstrate—through characters' miscommunication—the Cooperative Principle of Grice (1975) and the concept of register. While these communication breakdowns are intended as entertainment for TV audiences, for language learners they may have additional benefits: first, by drawing attention to communication rules that speakers take for granted in L1 and thus may not pay attention to in L2; second, by allowing learners to engage in language play for both education and amusement; third, by impressing upon learners the fact that meaning negotiation is a burden all participants carry, native and nonnative speakers alike.

ネイティブスピーカーが、L2学習者の文法や語彙などの間違いに比べ語用論的な誤りに対する許容度が低い傾向があるため、語用論的能力は言語学習の大切な一部とされている。本研究では、英国のテレビ番組のスキットを活用し、語用論的能力をユーモラスに示していく。登場人物間の会話が困難なスキットを選択し、GriceのCooperative Principleとレジスタの概念を示す。このようなコミュニケーションブレイクダウンはテレビ番組のエンターテインメント性として意図されているが、言語学習者にとってはさらに以下の利点が付加される。まず、L1での会話中当然のこととしているため、L2で話す際気付かないルールに注意を向けさせることができる。学習者は学習と娯楽を兼ね備えた「言葉遊び」に取り組むことができる。最後に、母語話者、非母語話者を問わず、会話における意味を交渉する責任を学習者に印象づけることある。

**T**HIS PAPER outlines how I have used sketches from the television shows *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (MPFC) and *Fawlty Towers* (FT) to teach communication issues and skills in a humorous way to university English education majors. First, I provide background on my teaching situation, then I discuss fundamentals of communication theory and humor in education. I next describe the TV sketches, showing what elements of communication are being humorously violated. The purpose of these videos is to let students see comic violations of various givens in ordinary communication, particularly those relating to register and to Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, in the hope that students will understand the concepts better from example, and also that they will perhaps take their own communicative failings a little less seriously.



## Teaching Background

My students are university Education majors who for the most part intend to become teachers—many of them English teachers—at the elementary, junior high, or high school level. They receive teacher training throughout their study in our faculty, but my undergraduate courses serve both as regular college level English courses—focusing on listening, speaking, reading, and writing—and teacher training courses. In essence I am teaching them as language students and training them as preservice language teachers at the same time. For example, like most language teachers, I incorporate a large number of communicative tasks for students' language benefit, but I also often step back with the students to discuss teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT). Activities we do to learn language in class are sometimes analyzed in hindsight for their applications to my students' future teaching situations.

Additionally, I teach a graduate course called “English Communication” which goes further into communication theory and in which we also spend a substantial amount of time focused on how humor in conversation exemplifies negotiation of meaning in a clear and remarkable way.

## Communication Essentials, Including Pragmatics

I dedicate part of one undergraduate course to “Essentials of Communication,” where we talk about what it means to communicate (regardless of it being in a first or additional language). We define and describe the primary means of communication and try to understand communication at many levels, from the phonemic or graphemic to the textual. Perhaps the most interesting part for me as a teacher is raising students' awareness of pragmatics. According to Murray (2010), pragmatics is on the rise in L2 instruction, largely in the form of speech

act awareness, and well it should be: “[Language instructors] have a responsibility to try and develop our students' pragmatic competence and help them better appreciate and understand how form and context interact to create meaning” (p. 293). Students going through 10 years or more of language learning, concentrating on how to conjugate two-word verbs, but never learning how English speakers use phrases such as “I'm sorry” or “Just sayin'” may be at a communicative disadvantage in a genuine English conversation. Crandall & Basturkmen (2004) confirmed that native speakers are less forgiving of L2 learners' pragmatic “failures” than they are of grammar or pronunciation lapses. A host family member may easily overlook an English learner's incorrect verb tense in a sentence, but turn positively angry over the learner's failure to use politeness cues to make a request. An example of pragmatic lapse that I give students is my own personal experience with a professor who used to greet me with “You must be tired!” at the end of every workday. He was translating a polite Japanese expression—“お疲れ様でした” (*otsukaresamadeshita*)—into an English phrase that could be interpreted at best as odd and at worst as rude.

There are many reasons that more time in L2 classrooms is not dedicated to pragmatics. One could argue that you can't worry about how to use language socially if you haven't yet learned to say anything at all. This argument resembles those—different perhaps only in degree—that say contextualized task-based language activities are useless without some decontextualized vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar drills. But just as drilling and meaningful communication can be done hand in hand, so can (and should) productive, communicative, and pragmatic skills be picked up in tandem (see Murray, 2010). In class I point out some pragmatic “universals” and build recognition from there. The MPFC and FT scenes I use help with contextualizing the principles. Two important universals of pragmatics that I will focus on here are the Cooperative Principle with the four maxims of Grice (1975), and the concept of register. Before

explaining how I treat these, I want to show why I feel a humorous portrayal of them is so beneficial for students.

## Humor in the Language Classroom

The idea that humor improves learning environments has not been confirmed categorically (many are trying—see Berk & Nanda, 1998, 2006; Deneire, 1995; Hayati, 2011; Özdoğru & McMorris, 2013; Schmitz, 2002; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011; Zillman & Bryant, 1983; Ziv, 1976, 1988), but regardless of inconsistent statistical proof, educators in a variety of contexts acknowledge the uplifting element that humor brings to teaching situations. For example, Özdoğru and McMorris (2013), though unable to clearly show learning improvement among psychology students who were exposed to humorous cartoons in their study modules, nevertheless found that the students perceived the cartoons as “humorous and helpful in learning” (p. 148), and concluded that humor in the classroom has intangible benefits.

Especially in the area of language and linguistics education, humor is used more and more as an aid to understanding how language works. Cook (2000) dedicated an entire book to the principle that humans learned their first language (and can learn others) by playing around with their parts in amusing (“ludic”) ways. A recent linguistics textbook by Dubinsky and Holcomb (2011) uses humor as its primary medium for teaching essential linguistic principles. And Medgyes (2002) prefaced his book cataloguing humorous activities for language teaching with the following benefits of humor:

- [Humor] is a good vehicle for providing authentic cultural information;
- builds bridges between cultures;
- practises language items in genuine contexts;
- brings students closer together;

- releases tension;
- develops creative thinking; [and]
- provides memorable chunks of language. (Medgyes, 2002, p. 5)

Note that these assumed benefits apply at several linguistic and affective levels, certainly including pragmatics. Finally, a major study by Wagner and Urios-Aparisi (2011) sought to solidify humor’s role in language education by recording and categorizing the effects of humor use in language teaching contexts around the world.

These authors and others acknowledge that humor is not inherently “good”; it can be used to serve divisive purposes, in life as well as in the classroom (see Meyer, 2000). Although humor flouts confinement to any one social purpose, it can be utilized to help us do beneficial things in education, in terms of both specific educational content and general student development. For example, Deneire (1995) advocated humor for “illustration and reinforcement” of target or previously learned structures (p. 295), while Hayati (2011) and Schmitz (2002) claimed that humorous texts are easier for language students to comprehend and remember. Others (Askildson, 2005; Wagner & Urios-Aparisi, 2011; Ziyaeemehr, 2011) recommended exposure to L2 humor as an essential part of building intercultural understanding among students.

In summary, while educators must be careful not to ascribe too much value to the benefits of humor in their teaching, and while they must certainly be careful in how they utilize humor, overall the research indicates that humor can enhance students’ learning experience. Certainly a foreign language student successfully negotiating not only the meaning of an L2 utterance but also its humorous intent is likely to feel a somewhat greater sense of accomplishment.

## Why MPFC and FT?

The sketches selected from MPFC are short and to the point. They are also self-contained. For the most part, characters and situations appearing in a MPFC sketch never appear again elsewhere. Thus there is little or no need to “set up” a sketch for students, since the sketch was designed as a self-explanatory unit for its original TV audience. FT, as a situation comedy, takes a bit more explanation, because the program’s plot structure and character development continue through all 12 episodes of the series. However, my focus with students is usually on the first episode, which like most MPFC sketches has the built-in responsibility of acquainting its audience with setting, plot, and characters. This kind of humorous material has an advantage over full-length humorous films I have used before, such as *The Blues Brothers* or *School of Rock*, where character and plot development take longer, and individual scenes require more introduction from the teacher.

Another advantage of these short MPFC and FT scenes is the strong visual element usually accompanying the dialogue. Monty Python, and John Cleese in particular (the lead character in FT), have a reputation for their strong physical humor, full of exaggerated and silly actions as part of the comedy. Students often do not need to fully comprehend everything the characters say in these scenes to see the humor and “understand” what is going on.

## The Cooperative Principle and Humor

Another ongoing debate in the world of humor research is what communicative function humor actually plays. We all know that we use humor in interaction, for rhetorical reinforcement, for social identification or differentiation (see Meyer, 2000), or just for entertainment. But does humor reinforce conversational rules, violate them, or does it just operate under its own rules? If

Grice’s Cooperative Principle assumes that humans in conversation typically “make [their] 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 [they] are engaged” (1975, p. 45), then how does a joke in a conversation meet the “accepted purpose or direction of the talk”?

The four maxims that comprise Grice’s Cooperative Principle (Quantity, Relation, Manner, Quality) are broad categories of the ways that our contributions satisfy the conversational demands of the moment. Everyday conversation rarely adheres precisely to these maxims; indeed, we often rely on implicature (making rational assumptions based on topics, speakers, and situations; see Grice, 1975) to “fill in the blanks” of conversation and allow it to keep going. Attardo (1994, p. 272) pointed out that some verbal jokes seem to blatantly violate the maxims, and he gives the following four examples:

*Quantity* [amount of information]

“Excuse me, do you know what time it is?”

“Yes.”

*Relation* [relevance of information to what came before]

“How many surrealists does it take to screw in a light bulb?”

“Fish!”

*Manner* [clarity of message]

“Do you believe in clubs for young people?”

“Only when kindness fails.” (Attributed to W. C. Fields)

*Quality* [truthfulness of information, at least to speaker’s knowledge]

“Why did the Vice President fly to Panama?”

“Because the fighting is over.” (Johnny Carson, 19 Jan 1990)

Each of these jokes demonstrates an apparent violation of a conversational maxim. The Quantity joke seems self-explanatory. While there may be a deep “relation” between surrealists and nonsensical answers to questions, on the surface at least the fish joke violates Relation. The Manner joke is an example of linguistic ambiguity (*clubs*), and ambiguity flouts Manner. The Quality joke seems to indicate that the Vice President is a coward, and could be construed (by some) as a humorous untruth.

It may be that each joke is considered humorous at least partly because of its conversational maxim violation. (And perhaps implicature is involved in how we “get” the jokes.) With this idea in mind, I present my students with the maxims through humorous scenes from MPFC.

### The MPFC Sketches

The MPFC sketches I use to highlight the four maxims are as follows:

1. *The Great Debate*: This “debate” on a television talk show consists of participants providing terse yes/no answers to one simple question. The program is over in less than one minute.
2. *Travel Agency*: This scene shows the opposite problem—someone who will not stop complaining about his horrible experiences with package tours.
3. *Management Training Course*: Here a job interviewer engages in increasingly bizarre behavior (ringing a bell and making funny faces), all the while pretending that what he is doing is an essential part of the interview process. At one point

the interviewee asks whether he is attending the right meeting or not.

4. *Marriage Registrar*: This scene at a marriage registration office includes several word- and phrase-level ambiguities that allow for humorous misunderstanding:
 

A: I want to get married.  
B: I’m afraid I’m already married.  
...  
A: I want you to marry me to—  
B: I want to marry you too, sir, but it’s not as simple as that.
5. *Customs*: This involves a smuggler attempting to lie as he goes through airport customs. He makes a poor show of it and finally confesses to smuggling Swiss watches, but the customs officer doesn’t believe the confession, presumably because he deems the smuggler too foolish to attempt such a crime.
6. *Burglar*: This scene has a man ringing the doorbell of a house and announcing to the resident that he wants to “come in and steal a few things.” The lady of the house decides to invite him in as long as he promises not to try to sell her any encyclopedias.

Students watching these scenes also have a handout with activities (see Appendix). The scenes correspond to different maxims of Grice’s Cooperative Principle, and the activities are intended to reinforce students’ understanding of each maxim by emphasizing its *violation* in each scene. I believe that the students, after watching the examples in the sketches, are more primed to understand the concepts and apply them to the activities on the handout. One essential point of the videos is the sometimes absurd conversational ends that characters go to in the scenes. (For example, a burglar ringing at a house and announcing his intentions beforehand hardly seems rational, let

alone the resident actually letting him in.) While it is true that implicature and conversational maxim-flouting are common and normal in everyday conversation, it is rare that the maxims are violated to the extent that they are in these scenes. It's my hope that, as a result of seeing these extreme MPFC cases, my students can see how interlocutors in a conversation are dependent not only on each other's words, but on their presumptions, understandings, and rationality. I also hope that (in the accompanying activities, at least) they will learn to take more risks and place more trust in their conversational partners.

### Register and Humor

*Register* has been used somewhat interchangeably with similar concepts under different names, such as *speech genre* or *style*. Halliday (1975) gave an early, authoritative definition as follows: "A register can be defined as a particular configuration of meanings that is associated with a particular situation type" (p. 126). His "meanings" include the particular words we choose to convey those meanings. Halliday was instrumental in developing the study of language in social context, and his field/tenor/mode model still does a good job of mapping the social constraints on how we use language. With graduate students, I go further by introducing a chart from Biber (1994) that sets up no less than seven parameters of language/context variation, including such factors as *communicative characteristics of participants*, *channel*, and *relation of participants to the text*. This is all to show that there are myriad contextual influences on our choices of what we say and how we say it.

Register is such a basic part of communication that I cover register variation to some extent in most of my classes, by way of activities such as writing two letters, one to a close friend and one to a dignitary such as the Queen of Bhutan. However, I reserve the overt study of register and all of its implications for my graduate students. To introduce register differences in a way

that I think they will easily understand, I start with a familiar, somewhat ironic and humorous situation from Scollon and Scollon (1995):

- A: What time is it?  
 B: It's two o'clock.  
 A: Thank you. / Very good, Frankie! (p. 18)

This dialogue with its two endings can show how conversational goals may differ between the street and the language classroom, even while using many of the same words. It is useful as an example of a *lateral shift* in register, as opposed to the much easier to conceptualize *vertical shift* or *formality shift* (see Gardner, 2010). Lateral shifts account for differences of speech in accordance with differences in context, while vertical formality shifts reflect more personal distance or hierarchical variation between interlocutors (although most changes in register are probably more accurately *diagonal*, or a combination of vertical and lateral). An example from a radio sports broadcast, recorded in Blake (2007), shows how excessive vertical formality can be a source of humor:

- A: He's certainly very good. Where does he come from?  
 B: He's domiciled in Newcastle.  
 A: Yeah, but where does he live? (p. 10)

Speaker B uses a formal term not normally found in discussions about soccer, and Speaker A points this out by sarcastically pretending not to understand what the term means.

Briefly then, register shifts and their humorous use can be classified as lateral shifts—often shown in how the same sets of words have different meanings and perform different functions

in different contexts—and vertical shifts—seen in how formality of speech fits or doesn't fit with its particular context. There are several examples of such mismatches of speech register and situation in FT.

### The FT Scenes

The very first episode of FT provides an excellent study of the uses and misuses of speech register in professional and interpersonal exchanges. It is excellent because the main character in the show, Basil Fawlty, has several conversations with the same guest at his hotel, each time under a different impression of the man's social status and professional role. Two main scenes demonstrate this, which I have titled:

1. Lord Melbury
2. "You bastard!"

In the first scene Basil displays a hurried intolerance toward the man, named Melbury. For example, when Melbury fills in the registration form with only one name, Basil disdainfully queries, "You don't have a first name?" as if the man had been raised in the wild. But when Basil learns that his guest goes by the name "Lord Melbury" his speech style suddenly shifts to a formal obsequiousness with many "Your honors" and "Your Lordships," and even odd French forms like "naturellement" which hark back to medieval royalty.

In the second scene the opposite happens, as Basil learns that Melbury is in fact a conman trying to get people to trust him with their precious collectibles. Here the register Basil uses in addressing Melbury shifts mid-utterance from polite to rudely familiar ("Ow's me old mucker?") and ultimately deteriorates to use of the word "bastard."

In my graduate course, we watch these scenes and analyze the dialogue, and we also go through the entire episode looking for other instances of register difference and shift among all the characters (guests, staff, married couples, etc.), as well as other linguistic phenomena such as dialects, codeswitching, and non-verbal communication. Some related register-noticing activities I do with graduate students (and sometimes with undergraduate students) include the following:

- *How Did They Say It*: Look for other evidence of register in a movie or TV show. Students may be able to point out forms of address, jargon, hedges, even tone of voice (e.g., the different contexts and ways in which Basil says "I beg your pardon" in FT).
- *Genre Switch*: Present material in one form (e.g., a news story), and have students role-play a conversation among participants in the story, turning news information into dialogue. This same activity can be carried out to three or more genres: personal diaries, interviews, and so on.
- *3 Stories*: Tell a story three times, as if you were talking to three different people: mother, boss, 5-year-old, or someone else.
- *Exercises in Style*: Compare chapters of Raymond Queneau's novel *Exercises in Style* (1947/1981), which tells the same short story of mundane events in 60 different styles or genres.

The purpose of these activities is to raise awareness of use of register, not only in English but in all social interaction in any language. The FT scenes humorously introduce the concept through Fawlty's bumbling failures to adequately socialize with others. Discussing register with students can be frustrating to them: To some it may seem as if they have to learn (and eventually teach) several new "languages"—formal English, colloquial

English, job interview English, and so on. This myriad of registers is precisely why narrowly defined English for Specific Purposes methodologies have come about. And indeed, for some learners there isn't much need to go beyond a certain realm of usage. But for those like my students, who wish to teach English themselves someday, and perhaps also for anyone who truly wishes to fit the broad, ambitious category of "Japanese with English abilities," learning the language must also include learning about the ways context and relationship affect the meaning of what we say. The scenes from FT show students that even native English speakers may at times struggle with speaking "correctly" according to time, place, and occasion (referencing the "TPO" catchphrase often used in Japan to indicate the need to be conscious of one's circumstances and to act accordingly).

## Conclusion

The four maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle are meant to be descriptive of what native speakers of all languages do almost completely naturally. They are intentionally vague, and they allow for a degree of exception, as any linguistic "rules" should do. The manifestation of these pragmatic norms in different speech groups, and among individuals, may vary widely. For foreign language learners, then, these maxims, while innately adhered to within one's own language community, may not be easy to see "on the page" in foreign language use situations. The same may go even more strongly for the employment of register variation in different language groups. Recognizing conversational norms and speech registers may be a sort of "forest for the trees" problem. In pragmatics training it is probably helpful to introduce concepts by pointing out (or letting students come up with) conversational norms and examples from their own culture and experience. As Fordyce (2012) said, "getting [L2] learners to reflect on how something is done in their first language . . . can activate awareness and noticing mechanisms" (p. 6).

But the main point of my showing these MPFC and FT scenes to my students is that it is also possible to heighten students' awareness with remarkable—and humorous—pragmatic examples in the L2. That the examples I give students are in the target language has many potential benefits. Students watching these scenes have an opportunity to see humorous instances of pragmatic difficulties—comical violations of conversational norms—among native speakers of English. In discussing what was funny about the sketches, learners are actually discussing universal pragmatic rules that we typically follow, while at the same time analyzing English language comedy. The exercises that accompany the videos not only may help the students internalize what it means to make their "conversational contribution such as is required" (Grice, 1975, p. 45) in everyday communication, but also are intended to provide L2 conversation practice (with helpful models—or anti-models—coming from the scenes). Finally, the comedy of the videos helps students see that English speakers can and do misspeak, misunderstand, and unintentionally offend each other in many different ways, and that they can laugh at themselves doing it. It perhaps lightens the burden on students trying to understand and adhere to L2 pragmatic norms in their own interactions.

## Bio Data

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## Appendix

### Sample Handout With MPFC Sketches (One of Several Handouts on Grice)

#### GRICEAN MAXIMS

<p><b>Quantity</b></p> <p>1. &amp; 2. <i>The Great Debate &amp; Travel Agency</i></p> <p>a. Summarize one of your favorite movies to your partner using only 10 words.</p> <p>b. Try to spend 2 minutes telling your partner about your favorite color.</p>	<p><b>Clarity [Manner]</b></p> <p>4. <i>Marriage Registrar</i></p> <p>a. Does “maybe” mean the same thing in all three of these situations? How is the meaning different?</p> <p>A: Are you coming to my party tomorrow? B: Uh . . . maybe.</p> <p>A: Do you have size 22 in this color? B: Maybe. I’ll check in the back.</p> <p>A: You’re probably the best chef in Paris! B: &lt;smiling&gt; Maybe, maybe.</p>
<p><b>Relation</b></p> <p>3. <i>Management Training Course</i></p> <p>a. What situation do you think the following conversations are occurring in?</p> <p>A: Do you have cinnamon croissants? B: Ten minutes. Situation? _____</p> <p>A: I think I’m lost. B: Click “Home” and try again. Situation? _____</p> <p>A: Would you like coffee or tea? B: Elephants never forget! Situation? _____</p>	<p><b>Quality</b></p> <p>5. &amp; 6. <i>Customs &amp; Burglar</i></p> <p>a. How does truthfulness affect our responses?</p> <p>(sure of what you are saying)</p> <p>A: Where’s the station? B: Go down this street and turn right.</p> <p>(not sure of what you’re saying)</p> <p>A: Where’s the station? B: _____</p> <p>(lying)</p> <p>A: Where’s the station? B: _____</p>