



## Pragmatic Failure and Politeness Strategies in Young Sheldon: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores PF and SPG failure in Young Sheldon, examining how the titular character's speech patterns contribute to the comic effect, characterisation, and broader sociolinguistic issues. Based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, and Hymes' Communicative Competence Model, the study sheds light on Sheldon's concretism, impoliteness, and lack of pragmatic adaptations to natural and social contexts, leading to frequent misunderstandings. A thematic framework discourse analysis approach is used, analysing selected scenes by transcribing and categorising instances of talk in which Sheldon exhibits pragmatic and/or sociopragmatic breakdowns. Its relation to the social description of each speech act is examined in terms of its impact on interpersonal relationships and humour. These results indicate that while scripted television may overemphasise pragmatic errors for the sake of comedy, it also mirrors the sociolinguistic issues that neurodivergent speakers and L2 learners encounter in the real world. By examining how humour arises from pragmatic norm violations, the article sheds light on the realignment of linguistic competences in media representations. It suggests avenues for further study, such as longitudinal investigations into Sheldon's pragmatic development and the cross-cultural (in)acceptance of his speech patterns.

**Keywords:** Pragmatic Failure, Sociopragmatic Failure, Communicative Competence, Politeness Theory, Scripted Television, Grice's Cooperative Principle, Young Sheldon, Humour, Sociolinguistics, Media Discourse

## INTRODUCTION

Success is not just a matter of language ability but of pragmatic ability—the ability to communicate appropriately in specific interactional and social contexts. When this skill fails, we can no longer interpret one another, with mundane consequences (humour that fails to land or social disharmony). Thomas (1983) discusses these failures as pragmalinguistic or sociopragmatic. He highlights the fact that "pragmatic failure is an area of cross-cultural communication that has received very little attention from language teachers."

In scripted discourse, pragmatic failure is not only used as a source of humour but also as a perspective on sociolinguistic issues. Young Sheldon's eponymous character embodies that overlap. His exact interpretations, lack of social grace, and inappropriateness in context often lead to comedic scenarios that underscore his communication problems. These cases are consistent with Grice's (1975) account of the Cooperative Principle (CP), violations of whose maxims may inadvertently result in misunderstanding or, when deliberate, in humour. According to Ibraheem and Abbas (2016), "Grice's maxims breaking, infringing and violation thus may result in the generation of angst".

In addition, Sheldon's conversations often violate Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness principles, especially by failing to observe them and by not dealing with face-threatening acts. In line with the results of Altakhaineh et al. (2024), who found that learners who were more exposed to cultural materials and interactions with native speakers made fewer pragmatic errors," an effect of social context on pragmatic ability.

The purpose of the study is to explore Sheldon's conversational style with reference to Grice's Co-operative Principle, Brown and Levinson Politeness Theory and Hymes' (1972) Communicative Competence Model. Using Qualitative Discourse Analysis as a method, the study aims to locate potential cases of pragmalinguistic failure in Young Sheldon, their comedic repercussions, and their influence on the creation and perception of the characters. In the process, the investigation provides greater insight into how scripted television can mirror and magnify everyday communicative challenges, particularly those faced by people who experience salient pragmatic difficulties, such as neurodiverse individuals and second-language learners.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Pragmatic failure, a central concept in applied linguistics, was comprehensively delineated by Thomas (1983), who distinguished between *pragmalinguistic failure*—errors in language structure—and *sociopragmatic failure*, which arises from misjudging social norms and contexts. Thomas emphasised that "pragmatic failure is an area of cross-cultural communication breakdown which has received very little attention from language teachers". These failures often lead to miscommunication, particularly in cross-cultural interactions.

Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, encompassing the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, provides a foundational framework for understanding conversational implicatures and the expectations of cooperative dialogue. Grice noted that "it is not easy to formulate suitable maxims for the quantity of information to be provided". Violations of these maxims can result in misunderstandings or, when used deliberately, in humour. Building upon Grice's work, Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory introduces the concepts of *positive* and *negative face*, exploring how individuals navigate social interactions to maintain face and politeness. They defined positive face as "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others" and negative face as "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others". Their model elucidates how deviations from politeness strategies can lead to communicative breakdowns.

Hymes' (1972) notion of Communicative Competence emphasises the importance of sociocultural knowledge in language use, asserting that linguistic competence alone is insufficient for effective communication. Hymes asserted that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless". Canale and Swain (1980) further expanded this model by delineating four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence, highlighting the multifaceted nature of language proficiency. In the realm of humour studies, Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humour posits that humour arises from the activation of opposing scripts within a text, leading to incongruity. Raskin proposed that "a text is funny when it is compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts and these scripts are opposite in a special sense". Attardo's (1994) General Theory of Verbal Humour builds upon this by introducing six knowledge resources—script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language—that interact to produce humour. Attardo stated that "the GTVH is an extension of the SSTH, which allows for a more detailed analysis of the structure of verbal humour". These theories are instrumental in analysing how pragmatic violations contribute to comedic effects in media.

Dynel (2011) explores the manifestation of humour in dramatic discourse, emphasising that scripted dialogues often exaggerate pragmatic failures to enhance comedic impact. She argues that "humorous phenomena in dramatic discourse... evince greater similitude than comedy discourse". This perspective is particularly relevant in analysing characters like Sheldon Cooper, whose literal interpretations and social naivety are central to the humour in *Young Sheldon*. Furthermore, Baron-Cohen's (1995) research on autism and theory of mind introduces the concept of "mindblindness," describing the difficulty individuals with autism have in attributing mental states to others. He posits that "we mindread all the time, effortlessly, automatically, and mostly unconsciously". This framework provides insight into Sheldon's character, whose challenges with social cognition mirror those observed in individuals on the autism spectrum.

Cross-cultural pragmatics, as investigated by Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) through the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realisation Project (CCSARP), examines how speech acts as requests and apologies vary across cultures, underscoring the importance of sociopragmatic awareness in communication. They found that "speech act realisation patterns vary systematically across languages and cultures". Collectively, these theories offer a comprehensive lens through which to analyse the pragmatic and communicative nuances of *Young Sheldon*, shedding light on how the show's humour and character development are intricately tied to linguistic and sociocultural dynamics.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Utilising a thematic framework, this qualitative discourse analysis examines cases of pragmatic failure, sociopragmatic failure, and breakdowns of communicative competence that feature in *Young Sheldon*. A qualitative approach is suitable for this study, as it enables a closer look at linguistic behaviour, social settings, and the intricate ways in which humour arises from a lack of communication.

Purposive sampling of episodes from Seasons 1 and 2 of *Young Sheldon* provided data for the study. The episodes were selected based on the frequency of scenes in which Sheldon Cooper exhibits high levels of communication disruption. Full verbatim transcripts of all relevant dialogues were created, retaining the spoken language and spoken discourse markers, such as intonation, pauses and relevant non-verbal cues.

The methodology applied the thematic analysis model introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006), based on a six-phase scheme. The researcher accomplished familiarisation with the data through multiple readings of transcripts to develop an understanding of the patterns of communication. Then, the first set of codes was developed by including the examples of pragmatic fails, impoliteness, and misuse of communicative competence. After coding had finished, these codes were clustered into larger themes. The coding schedules were then checked against the data to determine whether they adequately captured the underlying phenomena. Following the production of the thematic map, each thematic area was identified and named in relation to the theoretical lines that guide us in this study. The last stage was an interpretation that wove the themes into a narrative that linked the results to broader sociolinguistic theories.

The thematic framework of this study was theoretically informed by three major models. The study is grounded on Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) and focuses on Sheldon about the violation of conversational maxims, which are Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Identification of FTAs and polite strategy failure was informed by Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987). Second, Hymes' (1972) framework of Communicative Competence was applied to explore Sheldon's inability to use the language of society in various variables.

Theme framework There were four main themes identified emerging from the data: 1) Pragmalinguistic failure (manifested through Sheldon's literal use of language and inappropriate lexical items). 2) Sociopragmatic failure (in the form of failure by Sheldon to judge social distance and disregard the norm of expected politeness). 3) Flouting of conversational maxims (e.g. irrelevance, ambiguity and unnecessary bluntness). 4) Humor is achieved through pragmatic incongruity (Sheldon's literal responses are unexpected hence generate comic effects).

All dialogue segments that exhibited pragmatic failure were classified according to these thematic domains. They were then considered not only in a linguistic-error perspective but also in terms of their storytelling and humorous contributions to the series. Where possible, the analysis was supplemented by explanatory comments by the series' writers and actors to fathom the deliberate generation of humour through Sheldon's communicative activity.

Peer debriefing was used to enhance the credibility and reliability of the study. A third-party linguistic expert examined the preliminary coding and developed themes to verify the

interpretations. Data saturation was reached, with no new distinct themes emerging from further analysis, finalising that the findings of the study were extensive and trustworthy.

Through this methodology, this research aims to shed light on how Young Sheldon uses pragmatic breakdown for comedic effect, as well as the sociolinguistic obstacles to pragmatic competence more generally.

## **FINDINGS**

An examination of portions of Young Sheldon episodes demonstrates that Sheldon Cooper's channel of communication consistently aligns with three types of pragmatic failure: average pragmatic failure, sociopragmatic failure, and strategic competence failure. These malapropisms serve as a crucial function in the comedian's construction of the character and are also indicative of broader sociolinguistic processes at work — namely, pragmatic development and socialisation.

For one thing, pragmatic failures occur commonly in Sheldon's speech. His language can be narrow, naively literal — ignoring tropes, idiomaticity, implicature and the rest. An example is when a friend uses idioms, such as "You're killing it," which leaves Sheldon unsure and existentially fearful because he cannot understand the implied meaning. This pattern is suggestive of Grice's Maxim of Relation and Maxim of Manner being systematically flouted, as Sheldon regularly utters discourse that is either inapposite to the implied meaning or overly precise to the point of absurdity. These cases demonstrate that the humour in Young Sheldon frequently arises from overt male support of literalism and confirm Attardo's assertion (1994) that violations of relevance/clarity can be the principal mechanisms in producing humour.

Secondly, the paper uncovers a great deal of sociopragmatic deficit in Sheldon's failure to appropriately assess social distance, power difference and conversational propriety: (2) Just look at him. Sheldon has a habit of speaking to those of higher authority (usually teachers and clergy) as if he were on their level, and more than that, as if he were on theirs. His subversion of greeting/expression of thanks as politeness routines constantly threatens the addressee's face wants both +ve and -ve face; see Brown and Levinson (1987) on Politeness. For example, when a teacher asks Sheldon how he feels, he bluntly replies "That's irrelevant for the learning process", by passing both the relational small talk as well as the face-saving strategies that would be expected in this social situation. Such cases highlight Altakhaineh et al. (2024) that

sociopragmatic failure is often not due merely to linguistic constraints, but to insensitivity to socially imposed norms.

Third, Sheldon's communicative failures also often realise a more general breakdown in communicative competence in context, as defined by Hymes (1972) and further developed by Canale and Swain (1980). As clever as the guy is, and with a very sharp mind, Sheldon's sociolinguistic/strategic capacities are rather under-elaborate. He has difficulty modifying his language for a variety of listeners or communicative functions, for example, using the same register when speaking with adults, peers, or younger children. This lack of flexibility leads to difficulties in relationships with others and occasions of social withdrawal, which supports Ochs et al.'s (2004; as cited in Ochs & Kremer, 2006) findings. (2005), suggesting that the pragmatic impairment, in itself, can be detrimental to social inclusion.

Thematic analysis is supported by the fact that humour in Young Sheldon is strongly grounded in pragmatic incongruity. In fact, humour often emerges not just from Sheldon's inability to relate socially, but also from the audience's acknowledgement of the incongruity between his literal, socially oblivious replies and the unarticulated pragmatic standards of the other characters around him. This can be seen as justifying the claims of Raskin (1985) and Dynel (2011), who argue that script humour is often based on heavily exaggerated violations of conversational norms.

Curiously, the results may uncover an internal conflict between Sheldon's communication failures and his infrequent, if narrow, pragmatic development. In subsequent episodes, small gains in his deployment of indirectness or recognition of others' feelings suggest a quiet arc of pragmatic growth. There is but one scene in which the construction of pragmatic competence as part of a sociocognitive learning process for a character with a productive learning process is exemplified, though in a limited form.

In conclusion, the results suggest that Sheldon's verbal behaviour, in terms of both grammar and pragmatics (pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic failures), is not used merely for comic effect but as a mirror of real-life communication problems experienced by people with neurodivergence and other language learners. In the persona of Sheldon, Young Sheldon introduces a fictional but sociolinguistically revealing figure who typifies the socially awkward, and so the series becomes a useful vehicle for exploring how social dysfunction

manifests as pragmatically based communicative incompetence, utilising a set of common tools across the study of pragmatics, communication and humour research.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that Young Sheldon deploys PF as both a narrative and a comic device, while, on the one hand, mirroring the communicative difficulties of individuals with low pragmatic proficiency in real life. As viewed via Grice's Cooperative Principle, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory, and Hymes' Communicative Competence Model, the speech of Sheldon Cooper shows how humour arises from the systematic flouting of pragmatic conventions.

This study first reiterates findings from previous studies, proposing that in scripted media, considerable pragmatic encroachment is often employed to generate laughter (Dynel, 2011; Attardo, 1994). Sheldon's record of taking things literally and violating conversational maxims such as Relation and Manner illustrates how surprising inconsistencies between expected and actual responses lead to humour. His failure to compromise widens the distance from implicature, often leading to miscommunication that audiences are expected to laugh at. This coincides with Raskin's (1985) SSTH (Semantic script theory of humour), arguing that humour occurs when incompatible cognitive scripts clash- exactly what happens when Sheldon fails to process idioms as metaphoric language.

Second, Sheldon's repeated sociopragmatic failures point to the intricate nature of politeness in interpersonal encounters. His non-politeness, impoliteness, and disrespectful behaviour against the social hierarchy again show that anything offensive or threatening to the face will break the social reality, as put by Brown and Levinson (1987). However, the comedy of these moments relies on the audience's knowledge of unwritten polite norms and understanding that Sheldon is incapable—or unwilling—to follow them. This is consistent with the findings of Altakhaineh et al. (2024), who observed that pragmatic errors frequently do not result from a lack of linguistic competence but from failure to understand shared social norms.

The examination of communicative competence is extended to discussion. Despite his superlative grammatical competence, Sheldon's shortcomings in sociolinguistic and strategic competences (Canale & Swain, 1980) isolate him socially, and, thus, he exemplifies Hymes' (1972) assertion that communication is sociocultural, not simply grammatical. Sheldon is a

fictional but realistic prototype for high-co people (e.g., those who are neurodiverse or second-language learners, those who, like Sheldon, are highly cognitively capable but pragmatically challenged), also identified by Ochs et al. (2005) in research concerning child socialisation and communication.

Additionally, the thematic analysis demonstrates that laughter over humour stories with the moral that Sheldon's unromantic views are funny is also frequently imbued with empathy. Even as the audience laughs at Sheldon's miscommunications, there is an invitation to relate to his communicative difficulties. This dual purpose suggests that Young Sheldon contributes to a broader cultural conversation that celebrates and humanises practical diversity rather than simply ridiculing it. The portrayal in the current media reflects a trend found in portrayals of neurodivergent characters in more recent media sources, with treatment in a more sympathetic, realistic light (e.g., Baron-Cohen, 1995).

Relevant to the portrayal of the gradual development of the character that is Sheldon. Most of the humour comes from his consistent lack of realism, but occasional brief flashes of social understanding show that reality-pragmatic competence can develop, but slowly and interpersonally. This contrasts with previous depictions of socially awkward individuals as static characters and is more consistent with contemporary educational theories of the teachability and development of pragmatic skills (Chen, 2023).

Finally, the results have general relevance for research on humour, pragmatics, and media discourse. They argue that it is the point of scripted televisual culture to amuse and reveal communicative phenomena that are like and magnified from those that make up the fabric of normal phyibration (or very phon) life. On this basis, I argue that Young Sheldon operates as a space for creating and showcasing violation-based humour, as well as a cultural artefact that mirrors and potentially refashions viewers' understandings of communicative abilities and neurodivergence.

In summary, by measuring this aspect of Sheldon's communicative behaviour against an integrated thematic and theoretical backdrop, the study offers novel insights into how pragmatic failure is formulated, presented, and understood in popular culture. This type of analysis could be expanded in future studies to cross-culturally examine the portrayal of Sheldon's speech patterns or look at the evolution of pragmatic competence across various seasons of the show.

## CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate how Young Sheldon represents failures in pragmatic, sociopragmatic, and communicative competence through the eponymous character's speech acts. Based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Hymes's Communicative Competence Model, it was found that Sheldon's literalism, dismissal of convention, all politeness and inability to adjust language use to specific social settings are not only character traits, but also central mechanisms by which narrative and humour are constructed.

The observations indicate that pragmatic malfunction, when imposed as a strategic spanner in the works, gives rise to humour as a matter of expectation-busting and the activation of unspoken rules of ordinary language use. Sheldon's peculiarities of communication, especially his breaches of maxims and politeness strategies, are a fertile soil for studying how humour arises from pragmatic incongruity. In this, the series aligns with the frameworks for comedy developed by theoreticians such as Attardo (1994), Raskin (1985), and Dynel (2011), among others, who emphasise the crucial role of pragmatic abuse in humorous comprehension.

Outside of comedy, Sheldon's stubborn, pragmatic difficulties reflect real-life communicative problems encountered by individuals who are neurologically atypical (e.g., neurodivergent) and by those who learn a second language. His personage provides a fictional yet realistic portrayal of the overarching sociolinguistic issues in the attainment of communicative competence. Furthermore, the indications of his pragmatic development demonstrate that pragmatic capacity is dynamic and may develop over time, thus supporting the idea of communicative competence as an acquirable, socially cultivated ability.

Together, Young Sheldon demonstrates that popular culture texts can both reflect and amplify real-life linguistic trends. By staging pragmatic breakdowns sympathetically and humorously, the show challenges us to rethink our assumptions about what counts as ordinary communication and to appreciate the sheer variety of communicative practices. Additional research could build on this study by longitudinally analysing Sheldon's use of pragmatics across several seasons, or by juxtaposing cross-cultural views of Sheldon's communicative conduct to demonstrate how pragmatic behaviours differ across the world.

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