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Resisting categorization in interaction: Membership categorization analysis of sitcom humor

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Abstract

Membership categorization analysts have suggested that practices of resisting categorization are worth investigating, and these practices might be related to humor in interaction. This study examines how practices of resisting categorization contribute to the production of humor in the moment-by-moment flow of interaction. While humor can be found in a diverse range of interactional contexts, I focus on humor produced in a sitcom, a specific type of mediated communication. Using a United States sitcom series for data, my analysis demonstrates two mechanisms of the interactional production of humor related to resisting categorization. First, the repetition of categorization and resistance to categorization among participants can produce humor. Second, engagement in category-bound activities despite resisting the categorization can be a resource for the interactional production of humor. The analysis shows that the collective sender sequentially arranges fictional characters' categorization practices, resisting categorization, and category-bound activities in interactions to create humorous incongruity for the audience.

Keywords

Membership categorization analysis; Ethnomethodology; Conversation analysis; Humor; Incongruity theory; Telecinematic discourse

1. Introduction

Membership categorization analysis (MCA), a branch of ethnomethodological studies, explores how participants categorize each other and perform specific actions by using categories in talk-in-interaction and written texts. Categorical practices are worth analyzing in sociological and discourse studies since they are strongly related to important themes such as identity, culture, and moral order (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002). With its roots in Harvey Sacks' work (1972a,

1972b, 1995), MCA has been further developed methodologically and empirically by scholars who suggest examining categorization practices embedded in sequential structures of interaction (e.g., Evans and Fitzgerald, 2017; Fitzgerald and Housley, 2015; Hester and Eglin, 1997; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002; Schegloff, 2007; Stokoe, 2012; Watson, 2015).

In recent MCA research, practices of resisting categorization are drawing more attention. While describing the MCA's principles, Stokoe (2012) encourages researchers to examine how participants categorize others and resist categorization in interaction. Raymond (2019) suggests that analyzing interactional settings where participants negotiate or resist commonsense normativity connected to membership categories is a potential starting point for understanding conflict and change in normative expectations (see also Sacks, 1979). Resisting membership categorization is closely related to how we present our identity and culture while rebelling against other people's understanding of us. Furthermore, resisting categories ascribed by others and negotiating these categories' meanings can constitute moral conflicts among members of a society since these categories have moral connotations. Given that practices of resisting categorization would produce or reveal cultural and moral conflict among participants, the investigation of these practices can contribute to elucidating their cultural and moral consequences or effects in interactions, thereby explicating mutually constitutive relationships among membership categories, culture, and moral order.

Notably, while relationships between resisting categorization and cultural or moral conflicts have been argued, MCA researchers have also suggested that some connections exist between the practices of resisting categorization and humor, which is also closely related to culture and morals (e.g., Austin and Fitzgerald, 2007; Day, 1998; Robles and Kurylo, 2017). For instance, Robles and Kurylo (2017) argue that practices of resisting categorization might be

employed to make a joke or tease someone, and normative expectations on which these humorous actions are based would not be replaced. Norrick and Spitz's (2010) argument is helpful in understanding the relationships between conflict and humor. In analyzing ordinary conversations and scripted fictional dialogue, they illustrate that conflicts in interaction can be not only managed or mitigated by humor but also employed to produce humor. Given that practices of resisting categorization can reveal conflict among participants and that conflict can contribute to the interactional production of humor, the aim of this paper is to elucidate how practices of resisting categorization contribute to the interactional production of humor in the moment-by-moment flow of interaction.

While humor can be found in a diverse range of interactional contexts, from ordinary conversation to institutional settings, and its forms vary across contexts (e.g., joking, teasing, or comedy), this study focuses on humor produced in a sitcom, a specific type of mediated communication. Recently, linguistic scholars who study sitcom humor have suggested that when researchers analyze scripted television discourse, it is crucial to factor into two communicative levels: (1) interactions among fictional characters and (2) interactions between the collective sender (e.g., a director, screenwriters, and editors) and the audience (Brock, 2015, 2016; Dynel, 2011a, 2011b, 2016; Messerli, 2016). Due to their communicative structure, sitcoms are fascinating interactional settings for this study. As my analysis demonstrates, the collective sender systematically utilizes fictional characters' practices of resisting categorization to produce humorous incongruity for the audience, while the practices reveal conflict among the characters. Sitcom interactions provide a fruitful opportunity to elucidate how practices of resisting categorization can be related to conflict and humor simultaneously. This study analyzes fictional characters' practices of resisting categorization to elucidate how the collective sender employs

the fictional characters' category work for the interactional production of humor that audiences would enjoy.

In the following section, I examine previous MCA studies of resisting categorization and its relationships with humor. Then, in Section 3, I briefly review previous linguistic studies that conceptualize the two communicative levels of scripted television discourse, including sitcoms. After describing the data and methods in Section 4, two mechanisms of the interactional production of humor related to resisting categorization are analyzed and demonstrated in Section 5. Finally, the findings' significance in the realm of MCA studies is discussed in Section 6, along with future directions of MCA studies of humor.

2. Resisting categorization and humor

Several MCA studies have examined practices of resisting categorizations, as well as categorization practices (Austin and Fitzgerald, 2007; Butler 2008; Day, 1998; Fukuda, 2006; Leudar and Nekvapil, 2000; Robles and Kurylo, 2017; Roth, 1998; Stokoe, 2012; Whitehead, 2012; Wilkinson, 2011; see also Nishizaka 2021 on resistance to partitioning). These studies focus on diverse interactional contexts, such as interviews or discussions in television or radio programs (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2000; Roth, 1998; Whitehead, 2012), a health-related helpline (Wilkinson, 2011), and everyday conversations in workplaces and at home (Day, 1998; Robles and Kurylo, 2017). In these cases, participants reject the categories ascribed to them or deny normative associations between categories and specific activities (or predicates) that often have morally negative connotations. For example, members resist the normative connection between Romany and criminality (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2000), Caucasian and violent actions under

apartheid systems in South Africa (Whitehead, 2012), women and housework (Robles and Kurylo, 2017), and old age and bad health (Roth, 1998). Building on the previous literature, this paper intensively analyzes practices of resisting categorization.

Moreover, by drawing upon previous studies involving the relationships between resisting categorizations and humor, this study elaborates on the topic through an empirical analysis. Sociologists and psychologists who analyze jokes report that people generally mention stereotypes relevant to categories of gender, race-ethnicity, and so on to produce humor (e.g., Davies, 1996; Rappoport, 2005). MCA researchers also point out that categorization and category-activity puzzles are used to constitute jokes (Hester, 1996; Stokoe, 2012). More specifically, van de Weerd (2019) reports that referring to persons with categories of ethnic minorities can be a method of jocular mockery. Robles and Kurylo (2017) illustrate that resisting categorial expectations (e.g., an expectation that women perform housework) does not necessarily constitute serious resistance in interactions; instead, it frequently ends in teasing others and producing laughter. Additionally, scholars have demonstrated cases in which participants resist categorizations when others tease them through categorizations (Day, 1998) and where participants resist a category by making a parody of people under the category (Austin and Fitzgerald, 2007).

While some connections between resisting categorization and humor have been suggested, ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies have not frequently investigated humor produced in talk-in-interaction. Although several conversation analytic studies have explored humor as an interactional achievement (e.g., Greatbatch and Clark, 2003; Haakana and Sorjonen, 2011; Sacks, 1974; Stokoe, 2008), many studies in this field have focused more on laughter, joke-telling, teasing, and so on. For instance, after examining the sequential organizations of

laughter or the functions of laughter, some scholars argue that laughter is not necessarily oriented to or a response to humor (Glenn, 2003; Glenn and Holt, 2017). Moreover, humorous utterances may not cause the listener to laugh but invoke their inner comic amusement instead. Therefore, humor is not necessarily related to laughter. According to Glenn and Holt (2017: 295), humor is considered an elusive target by ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts because it is “an abstract category that is insufficiently specific for describing social actions and sequences or the visible orientations of the participants.” There is a risk that researchers may arbitrarily decide which utterances (or actions) are humorous without considering the participants’ orientations.

However, the risk does not mean the methodological impossibility of ethnomethodological and conversation analytic research, including MCA studies, of the interactional production of humor. Although tastes for humor differ from person to person, we can still analyze how interactions are designed to be humorous based on members’ resources, such as interactional rules and categorial norms (e.g., Stokoe, 2008). While some utterances or dialogues are not designed to be humorous in sitcoms, it is plausible to suppose that we can distinguish some sequences designed to be humorous from other sequences that have different functions (e.g., anchorage of the diegesis and character revelation; Kozloff, 2000). When we discuss whether a specific utterance (or sequence) within sitcom interactions is humorous, we have already reached an agreement to a certain extent that it is designed to be humorous. If we cannot share the understanding that a particular utterance or sequence is designed to be humorous, it is difficult or even impossible to talk about our taste for its humor. Sitcoms are a “perspicuous setting” (Garfinkel, 2002) to investigate relationships between categorization practices and humor because we can frequently find utterances designed to be humorous based on some stereotypes of membership categories.

3. Telecinematic discourse and its two communicative levels

When analysts attempt to identify the relationships between resisting categorization and humor in a sitcom as a specific interactional context, it is crucial to consider sitcoms' participation framework, which is different from ordinary conversation. While several ethnomethodological and conversation analytic studies have used scripted and fictional discourse, such as films, animation sitcoms, and television dramas (Chepinchikj and Thompson, 2016; Raymond, 2013; Stokoe 2008), this study pays closer attention to the particular communicative structure of sitcoms as "telecinematic discourse" (Piazza et al., 2011). Thus, previous linguistic studies on the participation frameworks of fictional interactions help this study investigate the type of interactional production of humor specific to sitcoms.

In the development of linguistic studies exploring participation frameworks of telecinematic discourse, researchers have pointed out that it has two communicative levels (e.g., Brock, 2015, 2016; Babel, 2008; Dynel, 2011a, 2011b; Messerli, 2016). In these studies, communicative level 2 refers to interactions among fictional characters in a fictional world, and communicative level 1 refers to interactions between its collective sender (e.g., a director, screenwriters, actors, and editors) and remote audience outside the fictional world. The collective sender and the audience do not share time and space in their mediated communication. Thus, the audience cannot intervene with the collective sender simultaneously in the communication. When researchers analyze telecinematic discourse, including sitcoms, it is important to consider the two communicative levels.

Analysts should note that even when fictional characters who categorize other characters or

resist categorization do not show orientations to humor on communicative level 2, the collective sender and the audience of sitcoms might be oriented to humor on communicative level 1. Linguistic researchers have explored relationships between the two communicative levels and humor in sitcom interactions (e.g., Brock, 2016; Dynel, 2016; Messerli, 2016). As Messerli (2016) illustrates, a humorous intention in sitcoms can exist on either the level of communication among fictional characters, the level of communication between the collective sender and the audience, or both levels simultaneously. Even when utterances or interactions are neither intended to be humorous nor understood as such by fictional characters, these interactions can be designed to be humorous by the collective sender for potential audiences (Dynel, 2016).

As argued in the previous section, participants' orientation to humor in interaction should be considered to avoid arbitrarily deciding whether an utterance is humorous. By drawing upon existing linguistic studies on humor and the participation framework of sitcoms, this study highlights the collective sender's orientation to humor instead of the fictional characters' orientations. The analytic focus is on examining how the collective sender designs fictional characters' interactions to be humorous for audiences, regardless of whether these interactions are considered humorous by the fictional characters themselves. By analyzing fictional characters' practices of resisting categorization, this paper elucidates the collective sender's practices of employing fictional characters' category work for the interactional production of humor that audiences would enjoy.

4. Data and method: MCA and the perspective of incongruity theory

The data are drawn from *Modern Family* (created by Christopher Lloyd and Steven Levitan,

2009–2020), a United States comedy-drama television series with 250 episodes, each lasting about 22 minutes. The sitcom depicts three families in Los Angeles. Phil is Claire’s husband, and they have three children: Haley, Alex, and Luke. Mitchell is Cameron’s partner, and they adopted Lily from Vietnam when she was a baby. After Jay, who is the father of Claire and Mitchell, divorced their mother (DeDe), he married Gloria. The relationships among the family members are presented in Figure 1 (I omitted Manny, Gloria’s son, from the figure because he does not appear in this paper’s analysis).

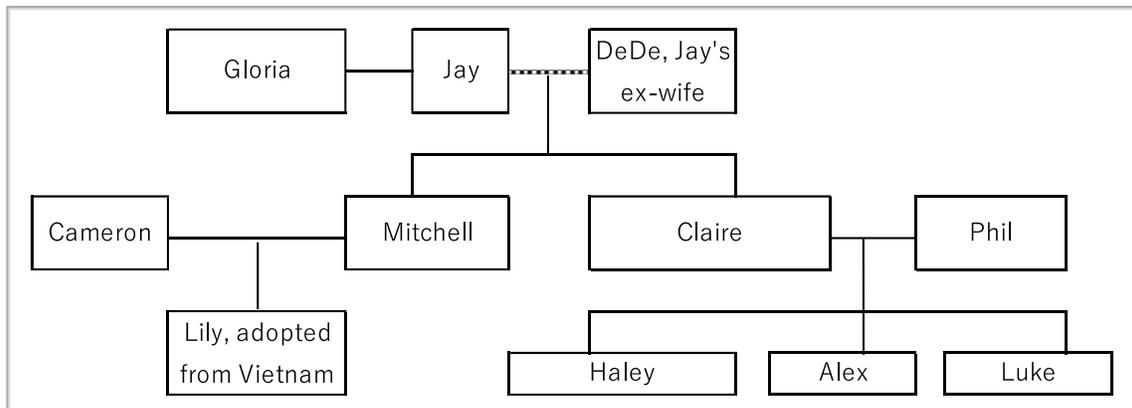


Fig. 1. *Modern Family* characters

Since the sitcom revolves around several families from different generations, it allows us to find interactional cases involving fictional characters’ use of membership categorization devices (MCD) such as family, age, and sexuality. The interaction contains fictional characters’ categorization practices designed to be humorous by its collective sender for potential remote audiences. In this sense, *Modern Family* provides rich data for this study. After watching all the episodes, I gathered a total of 84 instances where the fictional characters’ membership categorization practices (e.g., explicitly mentioning or implicitly invoking membership

categories, MCDs, and category-bound activities) are potentially employed for the interactional production of humor by the collective sender. Then, 16 cases that included the fictional characters' practices of resisting categorization were specifically collected. Based on the collected data, this paper presents four extracts that clearly show the relationships between resisting categorization and humor.

Applying MCA methods (Fitzgerald and Housley, 2015; Stokoe, 2012), this study analyzes when terms of categories are used in sequential structures of interaction, what actions or activities are performed with the category-use, and how participants orient to these categories. I also utilize the incongruity theory of humor (Carroll, 2014; Dynel, 2009; Morreall, 1987; Suls, 1972) to examine the relationship between resisting categorization and humor. Methodological considerations are provided below.

From the perspective of strict conversation analysis, Glenn and Holt (2017: 298) argue that one possible approach to humor is to focus on laughter and "laughables" in interaction. According to Ford and Fox (2010: 340), "[t]o count as a laughable, a turn (or part of a turn) must be produced with possibly laugh-relevant sounds and/or bodily displays, and it must be responded to with laugh-relevant sounds or bodily displays." Notably, according to the definition of laughable, fictional characters' utterances in which they do not show their orientations to humor by producing laugh-relevant sounds or bodily displays cannot be regarded as laughable, even when the audience can understand that the collective sender designs these characters' utterances to be humorous. When analyzing a sitcom as telecinematic discourse, where the collective sender and the audience do not have opportunities to show their orientations to humor synchronously, focusing on laughter and laughables is not always fruitful. The approach would not detect many sequences or utterances that are intelligible as being designed to be humorous in

sitcoms. Additionally, while some sitcoms have a (canned) laugh track in which the collective sender shows their orientation to humor (e.g., Messerli, 2016; Stokoe, 2008), other sitcoms, including *Modern Family*, do not necessarily have one.

Instead of focusing on laughter and laughables, this study takes an incongruity theory perspective to elucidate sitcom humor. The incongruity theory of humor argues that we find humor in perceived or observed incongruity among different factors (e.g., incongruity between what is expected and what actually happens). Many contemporary philosophical and linguistic studies of humor find the theory more plausible than other theories of humor, such as superiority theory and relief theory, because it captures the formal object of comic amusement and thereby provides scholars with a basis for empirical and concrete analyses of humor (e.g., Carroll, 2014; Dynel, 2009; Morreall, 1987).

The incongruity theory perspective is especially helpful when analyzing humor in a sitcom as a specific type of communication designed by the collective sender. As described in Section 3, fictional characters in sitcoms do not necessarily show their orientations toward humor, which the collective sender has designed for the audience. Rather, the collective sender's orientation toward humor can be found in the incongruities in fictional characters' interactions (Dynel, 2013; de Jongste, 2017; Messerli, 2016).¹ While not every incongruity in all interactional contexts is humorous, it is reasonable to suppose that the incongruity found in sitcom characters'

¹ Although Glenn and Holt (2017: 298–300) state that incongruity is a broad and vague concept, they also suggest that investigating incongruity generated in and through participants' practices can help identify resources for humor production in ordinary conversation. Some conversation analytic studies also identify an association between incongruity with laughables (Ford and Fox, 2010) or playfulness (Haakana and Sorjonen, 2011).

interactions can be interpreted as humorous by the audience. This is because the audience has genre knowledge that sitcom interactions are designed to be humorous by the collective sender (Brock, 2009, 2016; Messerli, 2016). Given this argument, focusing on incongruity in fictional characters' interactions is fruitful in elucidating the interactional production of sitcom humor.

To summarize, this paper employs the assumption that the collective sender intentionally designs incongruity in fictional characters' interactions to be humorous for the audience. Based on this supposition, the current study analyzes fictional characters' interactions from the perspective of MCA, thereby elucidating how humorous incongruities in sitcom interactions are produced by the collective sender. Specifically, I focus on incongruity related to participants' practices, such as categorization, resisting categorization, and category-bound activities (or predicates), to demonstrate how resisting categorization contributes to the interactional production of humor.²

5. Analysis

This section is divided into three parts based on the relationships between resisting categorization and humor in sitcom interaction. First, a case is examined where one participant categorizes the other participant repeatedly, and the categorized participant resists the

² While this study focuses on incongruity among categorization practices, other kinds of incongruity can also function as a resource for the interactional production of humor in sitcoms (e.g., fictional characters' breaching of interactional norms such as preference organizations; Stokoe, 2008).

categorization repeatedly, which contributes to the interactional production of humor.³ Second, cases in which humor is derived from participants' category-bound activities despite their resisting categorization are analyzed. Third, a case in which these two patterns are found is analyzed.

5.1 Repetition of categorization and resisting categorization

In extract 1, Cameron and Mitchell are seeing Dr. Miura, who is an Asian woman, in a hospital because Lily, their adopted baby from Vietnam, accidentally hit her head on the ceiling while they were playing with her. In line 01, Cam talks to Dr. Miura in a rather abrupt manner (see the Appendix for transcript conventions).

Extract 1, part 1 [Season 1, Episode 6, Run for Your Wife, 12:51–13:24]

01 Cam: You'll be pleased to know that Mitchell and I intend
02 on raising (.) Lily with influences from her .hhh
03 Asian heritage.
04 Mit: ((frowning at Cam))
05 Dr.: That is fantastic. .hhh Have you noticed any vomiting
06 since the head bump?
07 Mit: Uh, no °no=no°.
08 Cam: We've hung some art in her room=some Asian art, and
09 then (.) when she's ready for solid food there is a
10 fantastic fa:_ (0.2) place right around the corner
11 from our house. .hhh Am I pronouncing that right?

³ Messerli (2020) investigates relationships between repetition and humor in sitcom interactions.

12 Is it fɑ: _?
13 Dr.: (1.0) ((staring at Cam's face))
14 Cam: It's a soup.
15 Dr.: I don't know. I'm from Denver. We don't have a lot of
16 (0.2) fɑ: _ there.

Extract 1, part 2 [Season 1 Episode 6, Run for Your Wife, 13:52–13:56]

17 Cam: Thank you. ((bowing))
18 Dr.: Denver.

In lines 01–03, Cam states that he and Mitch place importance on Lily's origin, as they adopted her from Vietnam. As MCA studies have emphasized, a person's membership category can be a reason for engaging in particular activities, and we make categorial inferences about other people's reasons for activities in everyday life (e.g., a woman "picks up a baby" because she is the baby's "mommy") (Raymond, 2019; Sacks, 1972a, 1972b). Here, Cam's utterance is produced based on his categorization of Dr. Miura as Asian and shows his categorial inference that she would approve of their incorporation of Lily's Asian origin into their child rearing because of her membership category.

In line 04, Mitch frowns at Cam, which reflects his puzzled response to Cam, who had suddenly invoked the category "Asian" in the context of a medical examination. Since they asked Dr. Miura to see Lily in the hospital, relevant membership categories in this context are "layperson" and "professional" that have asymmetrical knowledge. Despite this context, using the race-ethnicity MCD, Cam categorizes her as Asian.⁴ Mitch's frowning face seems to show

⁴ Deciding which term is appropriate for referring to an MCD is often difficult, such as choosing

his orientation toward the deviance of Cam's categorization practice from the context.

In lines 05–06, Dr. Miura participates in two different activities (i.e., multiactivity) (Haddington et al., 2014): a medical examination and a non-medical conversation with Cam. Different levels of her orientation toward the two activities are present in her utterances. Initially, she concisely evaluates his approach to child rearing (“[t]hat is fantastic”), but soon, she resumes the medical examination by asking Cam and Mitch medically relevant questions about Lily. In the medical examination, participants can use the categories “layperson” and “professional” to control the course of interactions since these categories can always be relevant in this context (Sacks, 1995).⁵ Moreover, her inbreath (“.hhh”) between her positive evaluation and question shows her orientation to distinguish the two different activities.

However, Cam's talk still revolves around the category “Asian” in lines 08–12. Cam carries out repair by replacing “some art” with “some Asian art” (Schegloff et al., 1977), which constitutes his practice of invoking the category “Asian.” He pronounces the word pho, which refers to a type of Vietnamese cuisine, as “fa:” with a flat accent and asks Dr. Miura to confirm the accuracy of his pronunciation. This utterance shows his supposition of the asymmetry of knowledge between the participants in this conversation (Heritage, 2012a, 2012b; Stivers and Rossano, 2010), in which Dr. Miura probably knows the correct pronunciation because she is Asian. He categorizes her as Asian by asking a question oriented to the asymmetry of the

between “race” and “ethnicity.” In this paper, the term “race-ethnicity MCD” is used unless the distinction between race and ethnicity is especially relevant among the participants.

⁵ In the terminology of Sacks (1972a), the MCD, which consists of the categories “layperson” and “professional,” is called K. He describes K as an “omni-relevant device” (Sacks, 1995: I: 313).

knowledge (Raymond and Heritage, 2006). The concept of Asian is very diverse because it refers to many nations, ethnicities, and languages, so Cam's supposition that Dr. Miura, which is a common Japanese name, has clear knowledge about Vietnamese food or language is invalid. Notably, however, her resistance to the category "Asian" is not performed by explaining differences among Asian cultures in the following sequences. Rather, as will be described below, she categorizes herself by using another MCD rather than the race-ethnicity MCD.

While Cam's question constitutes the first-pair part of an adjacency pair (Schegloff, 1968; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) in line 12, Dr. Miura does not respond in line 13. As she does not give a second-pair part, as normatively expected, the one-second gap in line 13 is recognized as her silence. Furthermore, in line 13, a camera is oriented toward her face by the collective sender, which allows the audience to clearly see that the gap is her silence. The reasons participants remain silent after being asked a question vary depending on the context; for example, they cannot answer the question (Lynch, 1999). In line 15, she presents her lack of knowledge ("I don't know") as her reason for not answering the question and explains why ("from Denver").

What is remarkable here is that her statement of where she is from composes a practice of resisting categorization. Her expression of "from Denver" implies the category "American," which is not mutually exclusive with the category "Asian." Although these two categories are applicable to her, using the category "American" constitutes the practice of resisting the category "Asian" in this context. By saying "I'm from Denver," she does not choose a category other than Asian from a category collection of the race-ethnicity MCD; instead, she chooses the category "American" from a category collection of the nationality MCD. The practice of her resistance is based on Sacks' (1972b) economy rule: although Asian and American are both applicable to her, her utterance in line 15 presents that the category "American" is adequate in the context of the

conversation with Cam.

After the medical examination, their interaction continues as follows (extract 1, part 2). In line 17, when Cam leaves the hospital, he performs categorization through body movements (Reynolds, 2017) to convey his gratitude to Dr. Miura. He categorizes her as Asian again by bowing, an action he associates with the category. In line 18, she categorizes herself as American again by saying “Denver,” which is an abbreviated version of her previous utterance in line 15.

The repetition of Cam’s categorization of Dr. Miura as Asian and her resistance to the categorization probably contribute to the interactional production of humor. In extract 1, Cam’s repetition of the categorization is incongruous with the audiences’ expectations. Although we might expect that Cam will not categorize Dr. Miura as Asian again after she shows her resistance to the category “Asian” in lines 15–16, he categorizes her as such once again in line 17. The fact that he sticks to categorizing her as Asian despite her resistance shows his “mechanical inelasticity,” which Bergson (1911) treats as a constituent of laughable events. Furthermore, Cam’s categorization of Dr. Miura as Asian can be considered incongruous with the expectation of so-called “political correctness” within the medical examination, where a doctor’s race-ethnicity would not be relevant. Her repetitive resistance underscores this kind of incongruity. The above analysis illustrates that the collective sender sequentially arranges the repetition of Cam’s categorization practices and Dr. Miura’s practices of resisting categorization to make humorous incongruity recognizable for the audience on communicative level 1. However, these characters do not show their orientations to humor on communicative level 2; instead, their practices reveal conflict among them.

5.2 Engaging in category-bound activity despite resisting categorization

The practice of resisting categorization can contribute to the interactional production of humor without repetition. In the *Modern Family* series, there are several cases in which fictional characters engage in category-bound activities despite resistance to categorization. The incongruity between characters' resistance to a category and their engagement in an activity bound to the category can be a resource for interactional humor. In extract 2, enjoying their vacation at a lake, Claire and Phil talk with their children (Haley, Alex, and Luke) about their plan for recreational activities.

Extract 2 [Season 9, Episode 1, Lake Life, 3:59–4:28]

- 01 Luke: But if you're looking for something fun, the rental
02 guy gave us a pamphlet. ((gives Claire the pamphlet))
03 Clai: Thanks. We already got one but(.) ((reading the
04 pamphlet)) oh yours is different. Parasailing,
05 wakeboarding, jetpacking?
06 Phil: Ours has sunrise chair yoga, watercolors at water's
07 edge, and something called (.) clo:ud study:?
08 Luke: Yeah they gave that one to grandpa too.
09 Clai: We got the old people one;
10 Phil: No. Why would they do THAT?
11 Hale: ((smiling and pointing to clouds)) Looks like you
12 guys got some fluffy ones out today. That one looks
13 like a bunny.
14 Phil: ((looking at the clouds)) Oh yeah.
15 Clai: ((hits Phil))

In lines 03–05, Claire looks at a pamphlet given to her by Luke and reads aloud the

sporting activities listed on it. In lines 06–07, Phil reads aloud the pamphlet they received and finds that it contains less sportive activities, such as “cloud study.” In line 08, Luke states that Claire and Phil were given the same pamphlet that Luke’s grandfather received. Although he mentions neither the category term “old” nor the categorization device term “age” explicitly, his utterance is understood as an implicit invocation⁶ of the category “old” by Claire, who explicitly mentions the category “old” in line 09. She provides “category accounts” (Raymond, 2019: 586) that she and her husband got the pamphlet in which less sportive activities are suggested because they were categorized as old by the person who gave it to them. However, while she demonstrates an understanding of being categorized as old, she resists it by saying, “[w]e got the old people one,” with a medium rising intonation. In line 10, by saying “[n]o” with an emphasis and asking why they were given the pamphlet for old people, Phil also shows his unhappiness with the categorization and resists it.

After the sequence of categorization and resisting categorization, the interaction develops as follows. In lines 11–13, pointing to the clouds and describing how they look, Haley, Luke’s older sister, induces Phil and Claire to look at the clouds. Then, Phil does so in line 14. By engaging in a kind of “cloud study,” which is allegedly bound to the category “old,” he ascribes the category to himself despite his resistance to it. Claire’s hitting him in line 15 shows that she

⁶ The analysis of the implicit invocation of membership categories might seem similar to the Gricean analysis of “implicature” (Grice, 1975) to a certain extent. Importantly, however, conversation analytic (and MCA) approaches aim to specify how participants show their orientations to and understandings of implicatures of utterances in interactional sequences instead of elucidating principles or rules that allow utterances to have implicature in general (Drew, 2018). This paper also employs this conversation analytic approach to implicatures in interaction.

notices the incongruity between his rejection of the category “old” and his activity bound to it. On the level of communication among fictional characters (i.e., communicative level 2), Claire and Phil consider the incongruity more humiliating than humorous.⁷ However, on the level of communication between the collective sender and the audience (i.e., communicative level 1), the interactional sequence of categorization (line 08), resisting categorization (line 10), and category-bound activity (line 14) is intelligible as being designed to be humorous by the collective sender, who aims to make the incongruity observable for the audiences.

Note that the connection between the category “old” and the activity “cloud study” is contingent in the interaction. MCA researchers have cast doubt on the perspective in which MCD or membership categories operate in decontextualized ways (Hester and Eglin, 1997; Francis and Hester, 2017). Relationships between membership categories and category-bound activities are not decontextualized but relevantly constituted in each interactional context. As Housley and Fitzgerald (2015: 14) state, “category and predicates do not remain static but are continually developed, clarified, made accountable and even retrospectively modified.” Although the category “old” is typically not connected to the activity “cloud study,” the category is contingently bound to the activity by the participants in the context of extract 2.

In extract 3, a participant also engages in category-bound activity despite her resistance to the category. Unlike extract 2, the category she resists is not invoked by other participants but referred to by herself as a category that has been ascribed to her. In the extract, Dr. Miura is

⁷ While Claire and Phil do not show their orientation to humor in the extract, Haley, in lines 11–13, shows her orientation to humor by smiling and inducing Phil to do an activity bound to a category he resisted.

getting into her car and talking to Cam and Mitch about parenting after sharing a meal at their house.

Extract 3 [Season 1, Episode 16, Fears, 16:38–17:30]

01 Dr.: I had a very complicated relationship with my mother.
02 She was born in Japa:n, crazy: traditional. She
03 didn't want me to become a doctor=She wanted me to
04 get married and have kids=But (.) my father (0.4) we
05 would talk, and he would actually listen to what I
06 wanted. A-anyway, what I'm trying to say is .h having
07 a mother isn't always what it's cracked up to be.
08 Cam: Oh::: [thank you.
09 Mit: [Thank you.
10 Dr.: And (.) if you ask me, having two fathers who care as
11 much as you do makes Lily (.) the luckiest little
12 girl in the world.
13 Cam: Oh: [thank you so much.
14 Mit: [Thank you. Thank you for that. That's very
15 sweet, thanks.
16 Dr.: ((gets in her car))
17 Cam: And how are things with you and your mom (.) now?
18 Dr.: Ugh. ((engine turns over)) The only way she'll be
19 happy is if I'm some Asian stereotype (0.2) but that
20 just isn't me.
21 ((her car goes back and hits dust boxes))
22 I DIDN'T SEE THOSE
23 ((Cam and Mitch express surprise))

In lines 01–04, Dr. Miura says that her mother is Japanese and talks about their

relationship. She seems to relate two different categories to herself: “Asian” in the race-ethnicity MCD and “daughter” in the family MCD. In the following sequence, the relevance of the two categories is intertwined.

In lines 06–07, based on her experience as a daughter, she argues that a mother is not necessarily great for a daughter. Cam and Mitch, who have been anxious about Lily not having a mother in her life (which is why they invited Dr. Miura and asked for advice about parenting in this episode), express gratitude in lines 08–09. Her opinion about what it means for a daughter to have a mother is based on her experience of struggling with her mother. Similarly, in lines 10–12, she encourages them, and they thank her in lines 13–15. In the context in which the daughter category has relevance with Dr. Miura, Cam asks her a question about her relationship with her mother in line 17. In her response in lines 18–20, she explicitly mentions the category “Asian.” The utterance “[t]he only way she’ll be happy is if I’m some Asian stereotype” shows that her mother wants her to live as an Asian who will, for example, “get married and have kids,” as mentioned in line 04. Her utterances imply that the category “Asian” has often been ascribed to her by her mother throughout her life. Then, she explicitly resists the categorization (“but that just isn’t me”). She does not resist the category ascribed to her by the other participants in the interaction in situ. Rather, she resists the category that has been ascribed to her in her life.

Similar to extract 2, after resisting the category “Asian,” she engages in category-bound activity in lines 21–22. In the US, there is a stereotype that connects clumsy driving with Asians, and she engages in an activity that fits the stereotype. Like the activity in line 14 in extract 2, the activity performed in lines 21–22 in extract 3 can be understood as humorous for audiences because it reveals incongruity between engaging in the category-bound activity and resistance to the categorization. The collective sender makes the incongruity observable and thereby designs

this scene in which the participants talk about serious topics, such as family relationships and gay parenting, to be humorous for the audiences. In line 23, Cam and Mitch express surprise at Dr. Miura's reckless driving without showing their understanding of it as humorous. In extract 3, the humor derived from the incongruity is designed by its collective sender and would be enjoyed by the audiences on communicative level 1, but it is neither intended nor appreciated on communicative level 2.

To summarize, in extracts 2 and 3, the fictional characters engage in category-bound activities despite their resistance to the categorizations, and the incongruity contributes to the interactional production of humor. The analysis shows that the collective sender sequentially arranges the fictional characters' category work, such as categorization, resisting categorization, and category-bound activities, to make incongruity observable for the audiences.

5.3 Combining the two patterns

The two interactional patterns examined above are not mutually exclusive. Similar to extract 1, a fictional character resists categorization repeatedly in extract 4. Furthermore, despite resisting categorization, the fictional character's engagement in a category-bound activity is ascribed to the character by the other character in interactions. In extract 4, Jay, whose wife Gloria is much younger than him, has a conversation with Marty, who also married a younger wife, in Jay's house. In a previous scene in this episode, Marty said that Jay was old. Just before line 01 in extract 4, Marty stated that he had been involved in the invasion of Normandy.

Extract 4 [Season 7, Episode 10, Playdate, 9:05–9:31]

01 Mar: You were in the service?
02 Jay: Yeah, >but< different war.
03 Mar: Oh, Korea. Me too.
04 Jay: No, next war. Keep going.
05 Glo: Anybody wants some cheese? ((brings a cheese plate
06 to them))
07 Jay: Ah. ((going to grab cheese))
08 Mar: Not me. Gums up the o:ld ticker. hehheh Jay knows
09 about that.=
10 Jay: =No idea. Love the stuff.
11 Glo: Just be careful with the almonds. You may break the
12 denture.
13 Jay: Uh: it's not a denture. i-it's an implant. How many
14 times >we've been< over this.
15 Mar: And you forget stuff, too. Huh?=
16 Jay: =I never forget anything.
17 Glo: When we park at a ma:ll we have to take a picture.

In line 01, Marty asks a closed question about Jay's military experience. For a closed question, a "yes" or "no" answer is preferred over other types of answers (Raymond, 2003). Furthermore, as conversation analytic research has elucidated, positive responses are preferred over other candidate responses (e.g., for requests, acceptance is preferred over rejection) (Pomerantz, 1984; Sacks, 1987). Jay's utterance in line 02 is oriented to preference organizations. At first, he gives a positive, type-conforming answer to the question ("Yeah") and then adds an objection that they had military experiences at different times ("but different war"). Thus, his objection is delayed. Note that his objection seems to be oriented toward the age MCD. By mentioning that he was not involved in the same war Marty experienced, he argues that he does not belong to the category "old," to which Marty belongs. From line 03, practices of

categorization and resisting categorization revolve around the category “old” repeatedly. Marty’s utterance in line 03 shows his understanding that he and Jay were both involved in the Korean War, but Jay denies it in line 04.

While Marty’s utterance in lines 08–09 (“Jay knows about that”) is a declarative sentence, it can be understood as constituting a question because it mentions information that the speaker is uncertain about, but the hearer already knows (Heritage, 2012a; Labov and Fanshel, 1977; Pomerantz, 1980). According to Raymond and Heritage (2006), practices of membership categorization are closely related to claims of knowledge (see also extract 1). By asking the question, Marty asserts that Jay and he have the same knowledge because they are both old. Jay resists the categorization in line 10. When speakers make dispreferred responses, they frequently show their understanding of them by producing hesitation or silence before their responses (Pomerantz, 1984). However, Jay produces his negative response (“No”) immediately after Marty finishes his turn. His dispreferred response, without his orientation to its dispreferred character, constitutes his strong rejection of having the knowledge Marty ascribed to him. He denies having knowledge bound to the category “old,” thereby resisting Marty’s categorization of him as old.

Gloria cautions Jay that almond, also provided on the cheese plate, might harm his dentures in lines 11–12, and Jay replaces “denture” with “implant” in line 13. She makes the category “old” relevant by mentioning the term “denture,” which is an item bound to the category “old.” However, his repair practice (Schegloff et al., 1977) of replacing the term “denture” with “implant,” which is more popular among younger people, constitutes his resistance to the categorization. Treating Jay’s expression “how many times we’ve been over this” in lines 13–14 as an indication of his failure to remember things, Marty asks him a question

about a memory lapse in line 15. Forgetting is also bound to the category “old,” and Marty again categorizes Jay as old by mentioning it. In line 16, Jay immediately gives another negative answer. Similar to line 10, by producing a dispreferred response without delay, he strongly resists the categorization. He also says that he “never forget[s] anything,” which is an “extreme case formulation” (Pomerantz, 1986: 219). Pomerantz (1986) argues that extreme case formulations, which do not have literal meaning, can be deployed to assert that the speakers’ reports are objective. Jay’s use of it constitutes his strong assertion that he does not forget things, thereby resisting the categorization of old.

This kind of repetition of categorization and resisting categorization was also found in extract 1. In this case, Marty’s repeated categorization of Jay as old, despite Jay’s resistance, might be supported by the relative nature of the category “old.” That is, everyone can be categorized as “old” according to the age difference or similarity between the categorizer and the categorized. Moreover, similar to extracts 2 and 3, engaging in category-bound activity despite resistance to categorization is also found in extract 4, although Jay’s category-bound activity is not performed by himself but ascribed to him by Gloria. Gloria’s utterance in line 17 illustrates that Jay has to use photos to remind himself of things that ordinary people can remember, thereby implying memory lapses. This makes extract 4 a bit different from extracts 2 and 3, where characters who resist categorizations engage in category-bound activities in interactions.

In Extract 4, the two mechanisms of the interactional production of humor are found. First, Marty’s repetition of categorization is incongruous with the audiences’ interactional expectation. While we can expect that Marty would not categorize Jay as “old” again after Jay resists the category “old” in line 02, Marty categorizes Jay as such repeatedly, and as a result, Jay resists the categorization repeatedly. By arranging these categorization practices sequentially, the collective

sender creates incongruity between the audiences' interactional expectations of fictional characters' categorization practices and the characters' actual categorization practices. Second, Gloria's utterance in line 17 implies incongruity between Jay's resistance to the category "old" and his engagement in the category-bound activity. The collective sender sequentially arranges the fictional characters' categorization practices (line 15), resisting categorization (line 16), and the utterance pointing out his category-bound activity (line 17), thereby making the incongruity observable to the audience.

6. Discussion

This study has examined how participants resist categorization and how resisting categorization contributes to the interactional production of humor in sitcom interactions. This section begins by exploring the significance of the findings in the realm of MCA studies that illustrate the practices of resisting categorization and their consequences, followed by future directions of MCA studies of humor in broader interactional contexts.

6.1 Practices and consequences of resisting categorization

In practices of resisting categorization, participants are shown to resist categorization by either rejecting a category ascribed to them or by categorizing themselves using other categories. In extract 3, by saying "that[Asian stereotype] just isn't me," the participant explicitly rejects the category "Asian." In extract 2, the participant verbalizes his displeasure and resists the categorization by asking why he was categorized as old. The analysis of extract 4 reveals detailed and various practices of resisting categorization; the participant resists the category

“old” by denying neither having knowledge, using items, nor engaging in activities bound to it.

In contrast, in extract 1, the participant does not directly reject the category “Asian” ascribed to her but categorizes herself as American to resist the categorization. This is the method of ascribing another category to herself (Austin and Fitzgerald, 2007) and denying the category’s relevance in interaction (Day, 1998). After analyzing interactions that begin with the receivers’ questions about the callers’ ethnicity on a health-related helpline operated by a charity based in the United Kingdom, Wilkinson (2011) reports that callers often resist the category “White European,” which had been designated as a race-ethnicity category in advance, by using terms related to nationality, such as “British” and “English.” Scholars also argue that members can resist categorization or partitioning by invoking the other categorial or partitioning framework that is different from the one the categorizer employs (Butler 2008; Nishizaka 2021). Similarly, in extract 1, the participant chooses the nationality MCD and rejects the race-ethnicity MCD used by the other participant. In this case, she resists the category “Asian” to deny that she has the knowledge connected to it. As membership categorization practices are closely related to claims of knowledge (Raymond and Heritage, 2006), resisting categorization is related to claims of not having knowledge.

Moreover, this paper has demonstrated the two mechanisms of the interactional production of sitcom humor. First, fictional characters’ repetition of categorization of the other character, despite her/his resistance to the categorization, can be a resource for humor. When a fictional character resists membership categories that other characters ascribe to her/him, the audience expects that the other characters will not ascribe the same category to her or him again. The fictional characters’ repetition of categorization produces incongruity between the expectation and the characters’ actual categorization practices in interaction. Second, incongruity between

resistance to a membership category and performing an activity bound to the category can produce humor. The two mechanisms show how the collective sender sequentially arranges fictional characters' categorization practices, practices of resisting categorization, and category-bound activities in their interaction to make humorous incongruity among these practices observable and perceivable for audiences on communicative level 1, while fictional characters do not necessarily show their orientations to humor on communicative level 2. As described in Section 4, audiences can consider these incongruities to be resources for humor based on their genre knowledge that sitcom interactions are designed to be humorous by the collective sender, although the same kind of incongruity is not always interpreted as humorous in other interactional contexts.

As mentioned in Section 1, previous studies have suggested that resisting categorization is connected to conflict among participants (Raymond, 2019; Sacks, 1979) and the interactional production of humor (Austin and Fitzgerald, 2007; Day, 1998; Robles and Kurylo, 2017). This study illustrates how the collective sender of sitcoms designs the characters' interactions, in which practices of resisting categorization reveal conflicts among them, to produce humor for potential audiences. Additionally, the close relationship between resisting categorization and sitcom humor suggests that resistance does not necessarily change our normative connections between membership categories and activities. In sitcoms, fictional characters engaging in category-bound activities after their (repetitive) resistance to categorizations result in maintaining and even reinforcing the normative connections that the collective sender employs to support the intelligibility of interactional humor for audiences.

6.2 Future directions of MCA studies of humor

By drawing on the incongruity theory perspective, this study provides insight into how MCA research can approach humor, which is considered an elusive target in ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. As previous linguistic studies of humor in telecinematic discourse have illustrated (e.g., Dynel, 2013; de Jongste, 2017; Messerli, 2016), analyzing how incongruity among participants becomes observable and accountable in talk-in-interaction helps us examine the interactional production of humor. Furthermore, by employing MCA methods, this paper analyzes categorization practices and the incongruity among them in the moment-by-moment flow of interactions in detail, thereby contributing to empirical linguistic studies of sitcom humor.

This study has focused explicitly on humor in a sitcom as a particular type of telecinematic discourse. However, since fictional characters' categorization practices are understandable by audiences outside the fictional world, the norms on which their accountability relies are not unique to fiction. Instead, these norms can be referred to in members' ordinary interactions (Raymond, 2019; Stokoe, 2008). The analytic perspective focused on the observable incongruity between different categorial practices can also help researchers who aim to illustrate the relationships between humor and categorization practices in more diverse interactional contexts than telecinematic discourse. It would be fruitful for future research to analyze different categorial practices to elucidate how the interactional production of humor is accomplished in each interactional setting.

Appendix. Transcription conventions (based on Jefferson, 2004)

=	Latching
[]	Beginning and ending of overlapping
(0.0)	Length of silence
(.)	Micro pause
wo:rd	Prolonged sound
°word°	Soft sound
WORD	Louder sound
<u>Word</u>	Putting emphasis or stress
Wo-	Cut-off
>word<	Speedy utterance
.hhh	Inbreath
(h)	Plosiveness (plosive aspiration), which can indicate laughter
.,¿?	Intonation
(())	Transcriber's note

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