

# Thanks for the laughs: An exploration of humorous gratitude in *The Big Bang Theory*

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## Introduction

Thanking is an important function in daily life, but one which may be problematic in its execution. The expression of gratitude may appear brusque if unelaborated, or insincere if formulaic. Conversely, extended or repeated thank-yous, or those which stray too far from convention, may be characterized negatively as gushing, or as evidence that the speaker intends his or her expression sardonically. Even the initial decision of whether to perform the speech act at all can be fiddly. Failure to thank a benefactor is frequently evaluated negatively, and yet thanking when unnecessary can be perceived as condescending. While in daily life such difficulties are irksome when managed awkwardly, inappropriate realization of speech acts such as gratitude supplies frequent fodder for humor. Such communicative misfires yield laughter in wry recognition of the potential hazards of well-meant but clumsily implemented verbal behavior. Accordingly, an examination of how the expression of gratitude is exploited for humorous purposes provides insight into the act of appreciation, particularly its functions, conventions, and associated pitfalls.

## Thanking

The speech act of thanking can be hard to pin down. Searle (1969) asserts that 1) it is related to a past act performed by the hearer (propositional content); 2) the act benefits the speaker, and the speaker believes the act benefits him/herself (preparatory rule); 3) the speaker feels grateful or appreciative for the act (sincerity rule); and 4) the thanking “counts” as an expression of gratitude or appreciation (essential rule) (Searle, 1969, p.67).

Searle’s first condition, regarding the notion that thanking is in response to a past act, has been debated by other linguists. Coulmas (1981) points out that thanks may be extended for a benefit to be fulfilled in the future such as for a promise, offer, or invitation as well as for gratitude for completed favorable acts. (Coulmas, 1981, p.74). In this way, while thanking in advance is impossible, it is possible to thank in cases in which the act may have not yet been performed but assurances of its realization have been made.

Of greater interest is the notion that the speaker feels grateful or appreciative, when thanking someone for something one is ungrateful for or unappreciative of is clearly a common occurrence. Searle (1969, p.62) addresses the issue of sincerity in his discussion of insincere promises, suggesting that what is key is that the speaker *takes responsibility* for the intention to act as promised, whether he or she really intends to act as promised. Yet Searle apparently believes that thanking is different from promising, commenting that in thanking “Sincerity and essential rules overlap. Thanking is just expressing gratitude in a way that, e.g., promising is not just expressing an intention” (Searle, 1969, p.67).

However, thanking is often “a socially coded ritual in which the issue of sincerity is irrelevant” (Danblon etc. al, 2004, 54). Nonetheless, what may be sincere is the desire to satisfy the speaker’s positive face (Danblon etc. al, 2004, p.54). Wierzbicka (1987) makes a distinction between “saying thank you” and “thanking”, but nevertheless acknowledges that it is possible to thank someone insincerely. In spite of this possibility, insincere thanking requires at

least a pretense of good feelings toward the hearer (Wierzbicka, 1987, p.215.)

Acknowledging the addressee-oriented nature of thanking, Wierzbicka (1987) describes the speech act as follows:

I know that you have done something that is good for me.

I say: I feel something good towards you because of that.

I say this because I want to cause you to know what I feel towards you.

I assume that you would want to hear me say this to you.

(Wierzbicka, 1987, p.214)

Wierzbicka (1987)'s use of "I say" effectively circumvents the issue of sincerity, while her phrasing "something that is good for me" enables thanking for consideration and understanding, from which the speaker may not have actually benefitted materially. Moreover, "feel something good" allows for a wider range of positive emotions than Searle's gratitude or appreciation.

The speech act of thanking additionally has a variety of aspects to it, all of which can make it problematic in both its execution and comprehension. Among these are:

1) Gratitude as a face-threatening act

By expressing thanks, the speaker humbles him/herself and expresses a debt. At the same time, the recipient of an expression of gratitude may feel constrained to minimize the sense of indebtedness (Brown and Levinson, 1987, p.67). Speakers may employ a variety of strategies to deal with the face threat, including avoiding the face-threatening act or doing it "off-record" (Brown and Levinson, 1987, pp.68-69). This may lead to shirking thanking or to thanking in which the expression of gratitude is ambiguous and for which the intention may be misconstrued.

2) Reactive nature of gratitude

Gratitude occurs in reaction to another act (Coulmas, 1981). Haver-

kate (1988) suggests that thanking restores the “equilibrium”, verbally recompensing for an act done by the hearer to benefit the speaker. As a result, a failure to thank is a failure to address the imbalance, and hence, impolite (Haverkate, 1988, p.391). Moreover, a speaker may need to react quickly, without time to plan in advance what he or she will say (Schauer and Adolphs, 2006, p.122).

3) Multiplicity of functions

*Thanks* or *thank you* may serve a range of purposes. Aijmer (1996) identified a variety of functions, including acknowledging the receipt of something; accepting an offer or proposal; closing a conversation; dismissing a person; making someone feel good; expressing sarcasm or irony; or making a negative request (Aijmer, 1996, p.53). Additionally, people often thank in response to a previous speaker’s thanks (Schauer and Adolphs, 2006). Trosberg and Shaw (1998) further point to the role of thanking in handling customer complaints.

4) Multiplicity of appreciation strategies

In addition to the illocutionary force identifying devices *thanks* or *thank you*, numerous strategies may be employed to express appreciation. These include: demonstrating positive feelings, for example, complimenting or praising; making reference to the imposition; and promising repayment or indicating indebtedness (Cheng, 2005). These are frequently used in combination, and which strategies are employed and in what order may be regulated by the constraints of the discourse context.

5) Multiplicity of forms

There are several ways to intensify expressions of gratitude, including *Thank you/thanks very much; indeed; so much; awfully; ever so much; and a lot* (Aijmer, 1996). Use of these intensifiers in certain

situations may be highly conventional (Bardovi-Harlig et. al, 2008). Conventional thank-yous run the risk of seeming perfunctory, but innovative endeavors may be regarded with skepticism or misgiving. Finding the best fit between a beneficial act and the response to it may be difficult.

## **Humorous speech acts in sitcoms**

Much investigation has been conducted regarding humorous speech acts in sitcoms, which because of their typical setting in everyday situations often seemingly correspond to usual communication but are dysfunctional for a variety of reasons. Sitcoms feature a range of types of humor, but those related to the illocutionary force are often among the most frequently employed.

Brône (2008) created a corpus from the fourth season of *Blackadder*, a British sitcom, finding 192 cases of hyper-understanding — deliberate manipulation of a previous speaker's utterance to make a different interpretation — and 277 of misunderstanding based on a (fictional) character's genuine misinterpretation of a previous utterance. Brône (2008) further divided each type into the 10 categories of polysemy; homonymy; near-homonymy; indexical ambiguity; underspecification; illocution; deixis; inference; scope; and idiom. While illocutionary humor represented only 5% of the hyper-understanding humor, it comprised 40% of the humor based on misunderstanding, the highest category frequency for misunderstanding.

Most investigation of sitcom humor has not focused on how a specific speech act is utilized for the purpose of audience amusement. However, Elwood (2006) singled out comedic transgressions in the speech act of refusals, examining the first four seasons of *Seinfeld* for humor related to the speech act of refusals and identifying seven types of comedic manipulation: 1) Refusals of inappropriate requests, offers, and suggestions; 2) Comic reasons for refusals; 3) Inability to come up with reason to refuse; 4) Outright refusals; 5) Rejections of refusals; 6) Refusals caused by mistaken interpretation of

offer; and 7) Deficient or non-occurring refusals. The means by which the characters coped with the demands and intricacies of this face-threatening act, unexpectedly, laboriously, or defectively, suggest social expectations related to the art of refusals, made plain by their violation.

When violations are made in speech acts, it is important that the audience recognize the comedic intention. If not, the miscommunication may be viewed as “creepy, offensive, disappointing” (Gillon, 2011, p.326). This is typically accomplished through the creation of characters that are expected to behave in unconventional ways. In this way, problematic communicative behavior is viewed as the product of excessive arrogance, flakiness, spinelessness, gullibility, pessimism, cheeriness, gaucheness and so on, on the part of characters that are nevertheless at least somewhat lovable, or whose infelicitous speech acts based on these traits lead other favorite characters to grapple amusingly and ingeniously with the conversational challenges presented by them. For example, Gillon (2011) notes that the audience’s understanding of Lucille as a wealthy woman who is uncomfortable around those of lower social strata is essential to perceiving the following scene from the sitcom *Arrested Development* as funny:

Server: Welcome to Klimpy’s! Anywhere you like!

Lucille: This does not bode well. (*Sitting down and reading over the menu*) I’ll have the Ike and Tina tuna.

Server: Plate or platter?

Lucille: I don’t understand the question and I won’t respond to it.

(Gillon, 2011, p.325)

In this way, Lucille has opted out of performing the anticipated act of ordering food due to a failure to comprehend the elicitation. She has not only been unable to understand the meaning of the words of the server, but additionally she has been shown as incapable of surmising the type of act sought from her, despite its conventionality in server/customer interaction. Moreover, in declining to perform the expected speech act, Lucille has made no

attempt at redressive action but instead haughtily declared her unwillingness to engage further in the conversational exchange.

Phoebe, a ditzy character in the sitcom *Friends*, is similarly understood by viewers to engage in flawed communication as part of who she is in the program. Stokoe (2008) notes the following example of violation of communicative norms in turning down an invitation:

Joey: Hey, Pheebs, you wanna help?  
Phoebe: Oh, I wish I could but I don't want to.  
(Stokoe, 2008, p.295)

Unlike the example of Lucille's refusal in *Arrested Development*, Phoebe's declination starts off with a typical refusal strategy indicating a desire to comply. Viewers expect the second half of her utterance to profess negative ability, along the lines of "but I can't", but instead Phoebe expresses a lack of inclination, without mitigation. The juxtaposition of a socially acceptable opening to a refusal followed by an improper finish to the same speech act heightens the sense of violation on the part of the audience, as does the modeling of an appropriate refusal by Rachel, another character, earlier in the conversation, who has turned down the same invitation by saying, "Well, actually, thanks, but I think I'm just gonna hang out here tonight. It's been a long day" (Stokoe, 2008, p.295). In this manner, breaches of speech act conventions are often further developed by contrasting them explicitly with those that conform to social norms.

At times, the infringement of a speech act may not simply be a one-off gag, but may become the core of an entire scene, with the characters themselves examining the infraction. Washburn (2001) points out a scene in *Seinfeld* in which the characters Jerry and George try to learn the name of another character. Barred by social convention from demanding pointblank that she identify herself, Jerry and George resort to indirect communicative nudges which under usual circumstances would compel the person in question toward self-introduction. The woman's unconscious disregard for their

successive attempts forms the crux of the scene.

Likewise, in an episode of *Friends*, the acceptance of an apology by a minor character is viewed as unacceptable by two characters, Monica and Rachel, in its brevity (Stokoe, 2008). They knock once more on his door, and Rachel says, “Sorry to bother you, but I don’t think we can accept your acceptance of our apology. It just doesn’t seem like you really mean it.” To this, the other character again replies briefly and closes the door. Monica and Rachel then comment negatively to each other on his behavior and additionally act out their version of a proper apology acceptance, with Monica saying “I totally forgive you.” As in the scene in *Seinfeld*, part of the fun in this scene derives from the amplification of the speech act faux pas by the communicative obsessions of the main characters who are unable to simply overlook the speech act slip-ups and move on, but instead fixate on them, revealing their own eccentric behavior.

### ***The Big Bang Theory***

*The Big Bang Theory* is a highly popular sitcom which has aired on CBS since 2007. The show is about two physicists, Sheldon and Leonard, who live across the hall from an attractive woman named Penny. Two other physicist friends, Howard and Rajesh, are also involved in much of the action of the episodes. The humor derives from the lack of awareness on the part of the physicists, particularly Sheldon, regarding how to behave in everyday social situations.

Chuck Lorre, a co-creator of the program envisioned the program as one about characters “not quite fitting and understanding the rules of the road” (Overbye, 2010). In particular, Sheldon does not understand the social functions of language, and can only see its informative objective (Potzsch, 2012). At times, the characters flounder, uncertain of what to say or do; at other times, they communicate and act with misguided assurance in awkward and inappropriate ways. This comedic underpinning to the program yields a wealth of data related to speech act malfunctions which are intended to be

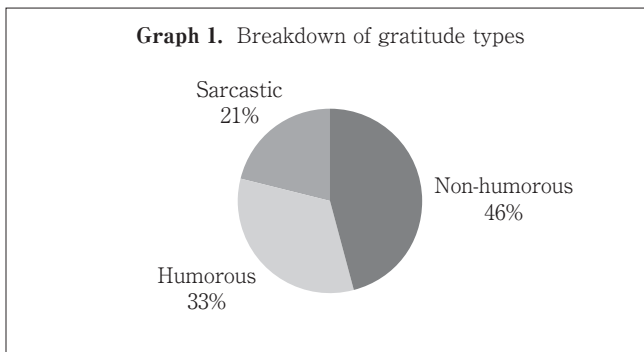


understood as amusing, rather than simply strange, as evidenced by the recorded laughter.

## The study

A search was made of all episodes in the first and second seasons of *The Big Bang Theory* for the words *thank* and *thanks*. Those that were not directly addressed to the interlocutor, for example, *Thank God* or *Thank him for me*, were discarded. The remaining 172 tokens were then classified as non-humorous, humorous, or sarcastic expressions of gratitude. This study investigates the manipulation of gratitude for comedic purposes.

Graph 1 shows the breakdown of gratitude types according to whether the expressions using *thank* or *thanks* were non-humorous, humorous, or sarcastic. Slightly less than half of the expressions using these illocutionary force identifying devices were classified as non-humorous: a beneficiary of a favorable act responded sincerely and appropriately to it. The second-most common gratitude type was humorous expressions, comprising one third of all the expressions of gratitude investigated. The remaining expressions using *thank* or *thanks* were sarcastic expressions, amounting to 21% of the data.



## Findings

Fourteen ways in which the expression of gratitude was manipulated in the 40 episodes examined were identified. Among these 14 types, five depended on previous speech or actions for their humor, an additional five depended on subsequent speech or actions to complete the comedic sequence, and the remaining four were slotted as “other” subtypes. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the types and subtypes.

**Table 1.** Breakdown of types and subtypes of humorous gratitude

Humor type	Subtype
Prior-dependent humor	1) <i>Gratitude expressed for prior insincere speech act</i>
	2) <i>Gratitude based on misinterpretation of prior speech act</i>
	3) <i>Gratitude for unintended beneficial action</i>
	4) <i>Gratitude for speech act intended for another beneficiary</i>
	5) <i>Gratitude for contextually inappropriate speech act</i>
Subsequent-dependent humor	6) <i>Gratitude for non-beneficial speech or action</i>
	7) <i>Gratitude-destructive subsequent comment</i>
	8) <i>Offensive comment following gratitude</i>
	9) <i>Insincere gratitude</i>
	10) <i>Unusual comment following gratitude</i>
Other	11) <i>Slapstick gratitude</i>
	12) <i>Gratitude directed at wrong person</i>
	13) <i>Reason for gratitude misinterpreted by third party</i>
	14) <i>Overly zealous expression of gratitude</i>

### 1) *Gratitude for prior insincere speech act*

A common way that expressions of gratitude were manipulated for comedic purposes is scenes in which an insincere speech act is made, but the character, unaware of the pretense, responds with ingenuous gratitude. In (1), Penny’s new boyfriend, perceived as suave, compliments Howard who is dressed as a court jester, having just come back from a Renaissance fair.

While not particularly intending to be vicious — perhaps even intending to be kind — the audience knows that it is highly unlikely that Eric really believes what he is saying. Nonetheless, Howard takes the admiring comment at face value:

- (1) Eric (*leaving, to Howard*): Like your hat.  
Howard: Thanks, my mom made it.  
(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 2)

The gap between the understood truth that the hat is bizarre, and Howard's proud acceptance of Eric's dubious approval is further emphasized by Howard's explanation that his mother made it. Howard is seen by the audience as amusingly credulous, oblivious to the divergence between the previous speaker's intention and his own take on it.

In another scene, Penny delivers an especially barbed compliment:

- (2) Alicia: Guess what? I got the part on CSI.  
Penny: Oh boy.  
Alicia: Something wrong?  
Penny: Uh, no. No, no, no, you know, congratulations, I think you'll make a great hooker.  
Alicia: Thank you.  
(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 19)

Cognizant of Penny's animosity toward Alicia due to Alicia's flirting behavior toward the men in the sitcom, as well as Penny's professional jealousy toward Alicia as a fellow actor, viewers have no difficulty in recognizing the nastiness of Penny's statement "I think you'll make a great hooker". However, Alicia blithely responds with pride. While such compliments were most typical of this type of humor, gratitude in response to other insincere utterances was also found in the data, as in (3)

- (3) Leonard: You know, guys come onto her all the time, so, you need to, like, set

yourself apart. You know, be a little shy, don't make too much eye contact. And, you know, treat her with, like, cool detachment and, and, and, you know, fear.

Stuart: Fear?

Leonard: Yeah, like, you're afraid that if you touch her, she'll break.

Stuart: Well, that plays right into my wheelhouse.

Leonard: Good, good. Well, you kids have fun tonight.

Stuart: Thanks, Leonard.

(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 22)

Viewers have earlier in the episode seen Penny ask Leonard for advice on how to make Stuart more comfortable around her, so they comprehend fully that Leonard's advice to Stuart will impede rather than facilitate the relationship. Consequently, the audience finds Stuart's earnest gratitude for Leonard's ill-intentioned suggestion humorous, in a manner similar to the responses to compliments by Howard and Alicia.

## 2) *Gratitude based on misinterpretation of prior speech act*

Another type of humor that is dependent on a prior speech act involves a misinterpretation of it. In (4), Leonard alerts Penny to an unfavorable situation, expecting that his notification will lead to its rectification. It does, but not as expected:

- (4) Leonard: Penny, you've got cheetos in your hair.  
 Penny (*Pulling cheeto out of hair*): Oh, thanks. (*Eats it.*)  
 (TBBT, Season 2, Episode 3)

Like Leonard, viewers have assumed that Penny will remove the snack from her hair, and that she will be grateful for the tip-off in order to avoid appearing unattractive and unhygienic. When Penny eats the snack, however, it becomes clear that she has construed Leonard's words as useful information in her hunt for a morsel to nibble on. While Penny's gratitude is anticipated albeit for a different reason, Sheldon's gratitude in (5) is unforeseen. It too, however, involves a misinterpretation of a prior speech act:

- (5) Sheldon: Are you able to have sex with men without developing an emotional attachment?  
Penny: Sheldon, I really don't want to talk about this with you.  
Sheldon: Is this conversation making you uncomfortable?  
Penny: Of course it's making me uncomfortable, can't you tell?  
Sheldon: I really have no idea. I don't particularly excel at reading facial expressions, body language...  
Penny: I'm uncomfortable, Sheldon!  
Sheldon: Thank you, that's very helpful.  
(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 21)

Penny tries repeatedly to warn Sheldon that she does not want to talk about her sex life. When Sheldon confirms her embarrassment and provides a reason for not understanding it sooner, both the audience and Penny expect that an apology will be forthcoming. Going against such expectations, however, Sheldon understands Penny's statement as valuable information for his research into sexual relationships and thanks her accordingly.

In the following scene, a rebuke appears to be in progress, but the speech act abruptly shifts to gratitude:

- (6) Howard: Cut the crap, you set this up, didn't you?  
Leonard: Yes.  
Howard: She's a hooker, isn't she.  
Raj: A prostitute, yes.  
Howard: You already gave her the money?  
Leonard: Yes.  
Howard: Thank you!  
(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 21)

The seemingly outraged demand to halt equivocation and the repetition of tag questions suggest that Howard is infuriated by the action of his friends. His question "You already gave her the money?" appears in this vein as confirmation that an undesired action is irremediable. As in (5), the audience is led to expect an apology. While in (5), Sheldon replaced an apology with gratitude, in this case the admonisher, Howard, unexpectedly switches roles to

become grateful recipient before an apology can be proffered.

### 3) *Gratitude for unintended beneficial action*

Being thanked for an unintended beneficial action is surprising but it need not be amusing. However, when the action is deemed propitious for the recipient but is unbeneficial to the unknowing bestower, the result is chagrin, which can be the target of humor. In this scene Leonard has attempted to soothe Penny who is upset about an inconsiderate boyfriend, Mike. However, Penny, perhaps unconsciously searching for a reason to surmount her ire and put a good spin on Mike's actions, views Leonard's consolation as encouragement to do so, something Leonard most certainly does not desire:

- (7) Penny: No, you were right the first time, this is a man who loves me, but in his own stupid way he was just trying to show people how he feels.  
 Leonard: I'm pretty sure I never said that.  
 Penny: No, you did better than that, you helped me see it on my own.  
 Leonard: Aw, good for me. Where are you going?  
 Penny: I'm going over to Mike's. Leonard, thank you so much.  
 (TBBT, Season 1, Episode 17)

The audience sympathizes with Leonard's vexation that his well-meant solace has been diverted for other unwished-for purposes. Penny's heartfelt expression of gratitude serves to underscore the ironic gap between intention and outcome, adding to the comic effect.

### 4) *Gratitude for speech act intended for another beneficiary*

Gratitude is expressed toward someone who has conferred something, by the recipient, someone speaking on his or behalf, or an interested party who may be understood to benefit indirectly from the favorable action. When gratitude is expressed by someone who does not fall into any of these categories, the thank-you may sound arrogant in its deliberate insinuation of involvement in the matter, or, as in the following scene, it may seem humorous if the person demonstrating appreciation genuinely believes that they are

the targeted recipient:

- (8) Leonard: You look very nice.  
Raj and Penny together: Thank you.  
(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 4)

The audience is likely to feel that Raj should realize that the compliment is meant for Penny and not himself. His failure to do so suggests a naïve and self-centered readiness to assume that he is likely to be the person toward whom favorable actions are directed. Such an inappropriate inclination, revealed by the mistaken supposition, is grounds for laughter on the part of viewers.

*5) Gratitude for contextually inappropriate speech act*

Saying thank you confers a seal of approval upon an earlier action, granting it social respectability. When used in earnest in a sitcom in response to an inappropriate speech act, it enhances the sense of farce on the part of the audience:

- (9) Leonard: You mean, kiss you now?  
Lesley: Yes.  
Leonard: Can you define the parameters of the kiss?  
Lesley: Closed mouth but romantic. Mint?  
Leonard: Thank you. (*Takes mint*). Shall I count down from three?  
Lesley: No, I think it needs to be spontaneous.  
(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 3)

In this scene, Leonard and Lesley take a scientific approach to romantic overture. The humor deriving from this awkward disparity is already in progress as they discuss the “parameters” of the kiss, and it is further augmented by Leslie’s offer of a breath mint to Leonard. While the audience perceives the offer as socially maladroit, Leonard’s appreciation of the action heightens the audience’s amusement. The humor based on disparity between matter-of-fact orchestration and affectionate impulse reaches its peak when

Lesley declines Leonard's offer to count down, on the grounds that the kiss should be spontaneous. In this scene, the expression of gratitude is not the center of the joke, but it plays an important role in developing it, due to the role of gratitude in endorsing certain actions as favorable.

6) *Gratitude for non-beneficial speech or action*

At times, the characters attempt to salvage dignity when another person has spoken or behaved in an adverse manner. In such cases, the expression of gratitude represents an effort to recast the previous speaker's utterance or action as more courteous than it actually was. For example, in (10), Sheldon responds with gratitude to a boorish command:

- (10) Leonard: Uh, we're here to pick up Penny's TV.  
 Voice on door phone: Get lost.  
 Sheldon: Okay, thanks for your time.  
 (TBBT, Season 1, Episode 1)

Sheldon's use of a conventional expression of gratitude for effort on the part of another, when that other person has gone to no trouble at all represents a mismatch that in other contexts might indicate sarcasm. In this case, however, both Leonard and Sheldon are nervous about provoking Penny's ex-boyfriend and would not risk even the veiled criticism implied by sarcasm. Rather, in order to avoid confrontation, Sheldon acts as if the previous utterance were helpful. The humor derives from the transparency of the endeavor, as in (11), in which Leonard addresses an unhelpful deliveryman:

- (11) Leonard: Okay, her apartment's on the fourth floor but the elevator's broken so you're going to have to... (*deliveryman leaves*) Oh, you're just going to be done, okay, cool, thanks. I guess we'll just bring it up ourselves.  
 (TBBT, Season 1, Episode 1)

In this scene, Leonard responds not to an utterance, but to a failure on



the part of another to act in the way he had expected. Leonard does not feel capable of persuading the deliveryman to complete the task, but he undertakes to mask his sense of inadequacy by feigning satisfaction with the circumstances as they are. As in (10), viewers are amused by the baseless expression of gratitude, and by their recognition of Leonard's craven motive in making this contextually inappropriate show of appreciation.

*7) Gratitude-destructive subsequent comment*

While some gratitude-related humor is dependent on a prior speech act or its thwarted expectation, other humor is only realized after the expression of appreciation. In humor related to a gratitude-destructive subsequent comment, the person expressing gratitude is genuinely grateful. However, a follow-up comment from the bestower of the favorable speech or action robs the beneficial action of its benefit, rendering the gratitude partially or fully groundless, as in this presumptively comforting scene:

(12) Leonard: Anyway, I've learned my lesson. She's out of my league, I'm done with her, I've got my work, one day I'll win the Nobel Prize and then I'll die alone.

Sheldon: Don't think like that, you're not going to die alone.

Leonard: Thank you Sheldon, you're a good friend.

Sheldon: And you're certainly not going to win a Nobel Prize.

(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 1)

Leonard is buoyed by Sheldon's words and candidly appreciative, but his newly obtained good cheer is dashed by Sheldon's next comment. Part of the humor derives from the understanding that Sheldon does not mean to be vicious in his assessment of Leonard's ability. Then again, neither has he intended to console Leonard in his previous comment, but rather, as is consequently revealed, merely rectify what he deems an improbable statement on the part of the despairing Leonard. As in subtypes 1) and 2), a speech act has been misinterpreted, but unlike these subtypes, the misapprehension only emerges following the expression of gratitude.

This humor subtype is common in *The Big Bang Theory*, and it is most often related to misplaced gratitude expressed toward Sheldon. At times, Sheldon manifestly attempts to adhere to social rules, which serves as grounds for appreciation, yet he is unable to keep up the effort, and undermines his endeavor right after the expression of gratitude:

- (13) Sheldon: Leonard, you are my friend. And friends support their friends, apparently. So I am withdrawing my objection to your desire to have a relationship with Leslie.

Leonard: Thank you.

Sheldon: I will graciously overlook the fact that she is an arrogant sub-par scientist, who actually believes loop quantum gravity better unites quantum mechanics with general relativity than does string theory. You kids have fun.

(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 2)

Sheldon makes plain his effort to do the socially acceptable thing by use of “apparently”, and Leonard is grateful for his support of his relationship with Leslie. Yet Sheldon has not fully mastered the rules of social interaction and thus voids his earlier espousal by explaining what he must “graciously overlook” in order to do so. What has begun as a declaration of support ends in affront, an amusing turn of events, bolstered by Sheldon’s obliviousness as evidenced by his final good wishes.

In another scene, Sheldon is similarly seen as being uncharacteristically sympathetic to a woman who is buying a book about bereavement at a bookstore:

- (14) Sheldon: Coping with the death of a loved one. My condolences.

Woman in queue: Thank you.

Sheldon: Family or friend?

Woman: Family.

Sheldon: Too bad. If it’d been a friend, I’m available to fill the void. (Woman moves away)

(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 13)

The conversation at first follows the typical pattern of condolences among strangers, prompting the woman's conventional expression of gratitude, but Sheldon's motive for instigating the exchange is revealed to be self-centered, nullifying the grounds for gratitude and provoking laughter.

*8) Offensive comment following gratitude*

In a type of humor closely related to subtype 7), the good feelings engendered by an expression of gratitude may be quickly trailed by an offensive comment, a flaunting of the notion of gratitude's "indebtedness", which is perceived as comical. In the following scene, Penny has mentioned that she has been visiting family members suffering from influenza, prompting an aggressive barrage of questions from Sheldon. Although such an interrogation is impolite, Penny accepts Leonard's apology on behalf of Sheldon, and receives an expression of gratitude from Sheldon in return. Notwithstanding his acknowledgement of Penny's kindness, Sheldon feels no compunction in submitting a command to her immediately afterward:

- (15) Leonard: Penny, you'll have to excuse Sheldon, he's a bit of a germophobe.  
Penny: Oh, it's okay, I understand.  
Sheldon: Thanks for your consideration. Now please leave.  
(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 11)

Sheldon's comment comically sunders the view that gratitude yields the beneficiary beholden, and the juxtaposition of gratefulness with bare-bones directive generates laughter in recognition of the breach of implicit social rules.

*9) Insincere gratitude*

In humor subtypes 1)-3), the expressions of gratitude, while making use of various mismatches between actual circumstances and the perception of matters on the part of characters, are sincere in their undertaking. Indeed, it is this misplaced or unpredicted appreciation that drives the humor. How-

ever, as in 6), gratitude may be expressed insincerely for comedic purposes. While in 6) the expressions of humor were aimed at recasting unfavorable situations as unobjectionable, in this subtype, a thank-you is given as a default response to a confusing situation in which good wishes have been expressed:

(16) Penny: All right, well, I'll talk to you later, but, I am so happy for you, Leonard.

Leonard: Thank you. (*to Sheldon*)What did she mean, she's happy for me? Is she happy because I'm seeing someone, or is she happy because she thinks that I'm happy, because anyone who cared for someone would want them to be happy, even if the reason for their happiness made the first person unhappy? You know, because the second person, though happy, is now romantically unavailable to the first person.

(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 5)

Leonard has professed himself grateful that Penny is glad about his new romantic situation, and yet he appears distressed by Penny's assertion. The divergence between the uncomplicated thank-you and the consequent convoluted examination of the basis for Penny's good wishes make for a humorous portrayal of the pretense contained in much on-the-spot social gratitude.

### *10) Unusual comment following gratitude*

While it is common to follow up an expression of gratitude with an explanation for the reason for the gratitude, which can serve as a means of boosting the sense of earnestness on the part of the thanker, an unusual comment, while nevertheless sincere, may be humorous in its offbeat grounds:

(17) Penny: Okay, here you go, Leonard, one tequila sunrise.

Leonard: Thank you. This drink is a wonderful example of how liquids with different specific gravities interact in a cylindrical container. Thank you.

(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 8)

Leonard's follow-up explanation is viewed as quirky but not problematic as Penny is well aware of Leonard's passion for physics. His fresh take on the delights of a tequila sunrise may be strange, but it is also charming. Nonetheless, the atypicality of it catches viewers off guard, resulting in laughter.

In another scene, similarly, an unexpected comment follows an expression of gratitude. Penny has been making and selling hair accessories online, and receives a thank-you from a customer:

- (18) Leonard: Look. Mrs. Fiona Fondell from Huntsville, Alabama has ordered two.  
Penny: No kidding. Two?  
Leonard: Uh-huh. Look at the comments.  
Penny: "Thank you, Penny Blossoms. These will be perfect to cover my bald spot." Aw, that is so sweet.  
(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 18)

The unglamorous basis for appreciation is unanticipated, as is Penny's reaction, which the audience might imagine to be surprise or even dismay rather than enthusiasm. The mismatch between young, fashionable Penny and her Internet-based business on the one hand, and the balding, presumably elderly, Mrs. Fiona Fondell on the other, creates a humorous duality.

### *11) Slapstick gratitude*

The characters in the sitcom sometimes behave unexpectedly, after which they express gratitude to the person who has unsuspectingly encouraged their action, adding a touch of slapstick to the humor:

- (19) Leonard: Maybe you need a fresh start.  
Sheldon: You're right. (*Takes whiteboard to window and throws it out. Picks up a new one*) It's a great idea, Leonard. Thank you.  
(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 14)

Sheldon's excessive response to Leonard's suggestion is already humorous, but his subsequent thank-you, which appears to enfold the bizarre action

in normality, increases the sense of farce. Likewise, in the following scene, Penny's cordial expression of gratitude is in stark contrast to her previous behavior:

- (20) Penny (*storming in*): I need to use your window.  
 Leonard: Oh, yeah, no, sure, go ahead.  
 Penny (*opening window*): Hey, Jerkface, you forgot your iPod! (*Throws it out.*)  
 Leonard: What's going on?  
 Penny: Oh, I'll tell you what's going on, that stupid self-centered bastard wrote about our sex life in his blog. (*Out of window*) Drop dead, you stupid self-centered bastard! (*To Leonard*) Thank you. (*exit*)  
 (TBBT, Season 1, Episode 17)

Penny's appreciation of Leonard's unwitting loan of use of his window is comically incompatible with the extravagant vehemence of her preceding action and words. While in (19) and (20), Sheldon and Penny are both the executors of the slapstick-like action as well as the thankers, in (21) Penny is the actor of the buffoonery and Sheldon its appreciative recipient in a simulated driving practice:

- (21) Leonard: Okay, fasten your seat belt.  
 Sheldon: Click. Now, are there air bags?  
 Leonard: You don't need air bags.  
 Sheldon: What if a simulated van rear-ends me?  
 Penny: I'll hit you in the face with a pillow.  
 Leonard: Okay, now shift into drive, pull out slowly into traffic.  
 (*General panic*)  
 Penny: Oh.  
 Leonard: Oh.  
 Howard: Oh.  
 Leonard: Watch out.  
 Howard: Oh God!  
 Leonard: Watch, watch out, watch out for pedestrians!  
 Penny: Oh God, wait, slow, hit the brakes, hit the brakes!  
 (*Sounds of car crashing. Penny hits Sheldon in face with pillow.*)  
 Sheldon: Thank you.

(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 5)

The grounds for Penny's offer to hit Sheldon in the face with a pillow are nonsensical since the driving is simulated, but because Sheldon has insisted upon simulated air bags, Penny whacks him with the pillow after the virtual crash. The audience can presume that it is pleasurable for Penny to do so as a means of relieving some aggravation toward Sheldon. How Sheldon will react, however, is less clear, until his expression of gratitude. The scene is humorous because both Sheldon has placed adherence to make-believe over personal comfort, a skewed pie-in-the-face type of comical choice.

*12) Gratitude directed at wrong person*

A failure to give credit where credit is due may also be exploited for humorous purposes. In the following scene, Penny mistakes the source of a compliment, causing chagrin for Leonard:

(22) Penny: You know, it's none of my business, but isn't a guy who can't speak in front of women going to hold you back a little?

Leonard: Oh, uh, he'll be okay once the women are mixed into the crowd. He only has a problem when they're one on one and smell nice.

Penny: Oh thanks, Raj, it's vanilla oil.

Leonard: I was actually the one who noticed... Okay, let's just start.

(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 13)

The audience can sympathize with Leonard's situation in which acknowledgement of the compliment has been addressed, not to himself but to Raj. The matter is too small to mention, although Leonard nonetheless makes an attempt at it. Although the expression of gratitude has become vexatious for him, Penny remains amusingly oblivious. Such humor points to the importance of proper recipients for gratitude and the farcical frustration when muddles occur.

13) *Reason for gratitude misinterpreted by third party*

Gratitude is a response to something beneficial; there is always a trigger. While in many situations the cause is clear, cases where it is misinterpreted may be amusing:

(23) Sheldon (*off*): Please Penny, enough, I have to sleep.

Penny (*off*): Okay, well, you were great, thanks. (*Comes out door*) Oh hey, Leonard, listen, don't go in Sheldon's room, he's not wearing bottoms.

(TBBT, Season 2, Episode 2)

The setting of the bedroom, Sheldon's plea, "Please Penny, enough, I have to sleep", Penny's praise, "you were great, thanks", and her caution to Leonard that Sheldon is not wearing his pajama bottoms all suggest that gratitude for a sexual encounter, although the audience is aware that Penny has been in Sheldon's room for advice about a computer game and that Sheldon has spilled grape juice on his pajama bottoms. Nonetheless, Leonard's astonished surmise can be seen to be reasonable in the context, and the divergence between what really happened and what appears to have happened is considered funny.

14) *Overly zealous gratitude*

The form of the expression of gratitude may also be manipulated to garner laughter. For example, when Sheldon's sister Missy comes to visit, she is overwhelmed by the characters' uncouth attempts at conversation. When Penny provides a means of rescue, Missy's acceptance and gratitude is forceful:

(24) Raj: Missy, do you enjoy pajamas?

Missy: I guess.

Raj: We Indians invented them. You're welcome.

Howard: Yeah, well my people invented circumcision. You're welcome!

Penny: Missy, I'm going to go get my nails done. Do you want to come?



Missy: God, yes. Thanks.  
(TBBT, Season 1, Episode 15)

While overly zealous gratitude is often associated with sarcasm, in this way it may also be related to humor. Missy is sincere in her gratitude, but perhaps a bit more enthusiastic than expected, suggesting that the benefit Penny has bestowed is more valuable than supposed, and conversely, that the time spent with the male characters has imposed an onerous burden on her.

## Discussion

The 14 types of humor related to gratitude identified in *The Big Bang Theory* point to particularly salient features of the speech act of thanking, as well as the potential for things to go awry. An examination of the types of ways that thanking is exploited in the sitcom reveals some “dos and don’ts” of thanking behavior, and makes it clear that the grounds for gratitude is at the core of much humor related to thanking, as well as the notion of thanking as a gracious social activity.

The speech act of thanking is founded on the notion of benefit or “something good”. This may be considered the grounds for initiation of the speech act. However, clearly it is important to be discerning in comprehending this benefit. As seen in several scenes in the program, gratitude expressed unsuspectingly for something that is not truly beneficial for the thanker may be problematic. Characters in *The Big Bang Theory* are seen to respond with innocent gratitude to insincere compliments or deliberately unconstructive advice (type 1). While the thankers believe that “something good” has been done for them, viewers recognize the groundlessness of this credence. In other situations, a thanker may believe that they are the target of an authentically beneficial action, when actually another person is the intended recipient, as in the case of thanking someone for a compliment which was directed at someone else (type 4). Moreover, the grounds for gratitude, while appearing firm, may be proved to be wobbly following the thank-you, as in

the case of gratitude-destructive subsequent comments (type 7). All of these types of humor suggest that a rule of communication is “Thanker beware”.

In the cases just described, the thankers are misled into believing that they are beneficiaries of favorable actions or mistaken in interpreting fully the grounds for gratitude. At other times, the thanker may perceive correctly that “something good” has been offered in good faith, and yet nonetheless wonder they have been recipients of it (type 9), which in sitcoms can lead to amusingly lengthy scrutiny of the benefactor’s motivation. Conversely, thankers may deliberately pretend that they have received something good and respond with gratitude as a strategy to avoid confrontation (type 6). In other cases, thankers may derive genuine benefit where none was intended, or where a different type of benefit was intended (type 2). Speakers have intentions, but the perlocutionary effect of their utterances may be quite different. As a result, gratitude may be expressed in response to criticism, instead of making an apology, for example. Alternatively, thanks may be given in response to statements or actions which have been misinterpreted, such as consolatory words recast as advice (type 3). In such cases, the thankers are not perceived as dupes, although here, too, the grounds for gratitude is problematic. The unexpected thank-you is unnerving and possibly frustrating.

Yet another type of grounds-based gratitude humor in which the thanker is not deceived but the expression of gratitude seems funny is gratitude with unusual comments following the thank-you (type 10). Expressions of gratitude are frequently composed of a range of appreciation strategies in addition to the illocutionary force indicating device. One of these is to explain the reason for gratitude more fully, which is seen as a means of demonstrating the sincerity of the gratitude. However, the reason for gratitude may be unanticipated, as when Leonard thanks Penny for a tequila sunrise, stating “This drink is a wonderful example of how liquids with different specific gravities interact in a cylindrical container.” Use of such out of the ordinary grounds in the expression of gratitude may not be problematic but is considered amusing because it strays surprisingly from standard gratitude

rationale.

Slapstick gratitude (type 11) and the reason for gratitude misinterpreted by a third party (type 13) are special types of grounds-based gratitude humor. In slapstick gratitude, what has been received is beyond what is expected in usual social interaction, and often more than the bestower realized that he or she was agreeing to provide. The interaction follows usual rules, but the action is extraordinary and would be normally thought of as unfavorable, a juxtaposition which generates comedy. When the reason for gratitude is misinterpreted by a third party, the cause of humor is typically the recognition that an utterance in a given context is likely to be interpreted through the filter of that context. Thus, gratitude coupled with a bedroom setting at night may be supposed incorrectly to have a sexual basis. The misunderstanding draws attention once more to the centrality of grounds in the speech act of gratitude, so that even onlookers will seek, at times erroneously, the grounds for gratitude.

Thanking is furthermore an important mark of endorsement and good manners. It bestows a seal of approval on a previous utterance or action, signifying acquiescence in matters as they stand, an admission of acceptability. For this reason, an expression of gratitude for a contextually inappropriate speech act is perceived as humorous even if it fits the offer, invitation, etc. immediately preceding it because the expected response would be to withhold the consent implied by the thank-you (type 5). Moreover, thanking is a sign of graciousness, and this aspect may also be manipulated for comedic purposes, if the speaker appends an abrasive comment to a thank-you which has appeared sincere (type 8). Such concurrence undermines the notion of indebtedness implied in gratitude, resulting in laughter. While it might be initially assumed that eager expressions of gratitude are politer than more restrained ones, humor based on overly zealous gratitude (type 14) demonstrates that such fervent thank-yous can reveal gracelessly the degree of discontent with the pre-benefit situation. On the other hand, courtesy may dictate the expression of gratitude when receiving something of assumed

benefit even if the recipient feels ambivalent (type 9).

The social nature of gratitude as a means of righting the equilibrium following a bestowed benefit is at the heart of humor related to gratitude directed at the wrong person (type 12). It is important to say thank you, but clearly the expression of gratitude should be addressed to the right person, the one who has bestowed the benefit. Humor that exploits the chagrin caused by blunders in assigning credit points to this basic aspect of gratitude, which can be a source of vexation in daily life as well as in the world of sitcoms.

## Conclusion

Sitcoms provide rich data for speech acts gone askew for comedic purposes. As such, they offer important insight about illocutionary no-nos, which may be of use to learners of English (Washburn, 2001, Martínez. and Fernández, 2008). Investigation of humor related to thanking makes plain a wide range of comedic manipulations which demonstrate aspects of the expression of gratitude that are particularly salient for viewers. In particular, the grounds for gratitude — the “something good” that has occurred to initiate the thanking — may be tweaked to generate laughter. Additionally, thanking as an indicator of genteel behavior enables offbeat adjustment to achieve humorous aims. In this way, an analysis of violations in the execution of expressions of gratitude in *The Big Bang Theory* reveals the implicit rules of a socially vital speech act.

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