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美國情境喜劇《宅男行不行》的社會語言學分析

A Sociolinguistic Analysis of American Sitcom

The Big Bang Theory

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摘要

本論文探討美國情境喜劇《宅男行不行》中與刻板印象相關的幽默及笑點。本劇主角為四位「宅男¹」(nerds)以及一位活潑的女性，宅族與非宅族間的互動，以及宅男的刻板印象再現為本劇主要的幽默來源。根據 Bucholtz (2001)的研究，美國社會中 nerd 的主要刻板印象為「社會適應不良」及「智力高於常人」。在本劇中，宅男同時被再現為科幻迷、漫畫書迷、以及電玩迷。

本劇中的宅男「社會適應不良」在於無法理解語言中語用及社會語言學的重要性：對於語用中禮貌、諷刺、蘊含意義難以理解，以及社會語言學中禁忌話題及對話情境時常忽略。宅男在本劇中「智力高於常人」層面來自於不論情境時常使用正式語或書面語，以及時常對他人展現自己高超的智力，也透過自己對科學、科技的精通展示自己的男性氣概。另外，劇中的宅男被再現為科幻迷、漫畫書迷、以及電玩迷，時常引用及背誦科幻作品中的台詞，以及討論科幻作品情境及角色設定。

族裔的刻板印象也是本劇的幽默來源。在五位主角中，一位是猶太人，另一位是印度人，此二族裔的刻板印象也在本劇中出現。另外三位白人主角的刻板印象(例如美國鄉下的成長背景)同樣也是本劇的幽默來源。

在《宅男行不行》中，「宅」即是相對於「不宅」，因此許多情境都需要參照角色來反襯宅男與「一般人」的不同之處，通常不宅的那位女性為參照角色，但是隨情境需要可能調整。

關鍵字：幽默、刻板印象、宅/宅男、情境喜劇、族裔

¹ 「宅男」為一文化相關字彙。美式英語(Standard American English)中的 nerd/geek 與台灣國語(Taiwan Mandarin)中的「宅/宅男」涵義並不完全相同，本文作者採用「宅男」這個翻譯是為了配合片商將本情境喜劇引進台灣時所翻譯的劇名《宅男行不行》，並不代表作者對於此翻譯的偏好。

Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the stereotype-related humor in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. The sitcom centers around four male physicists who are considered as “nerds/geeks.” One day, a beautiful and perky girl comes into their lives, and humor ensues from the interaction between the nerds and the non-nerd. The stereotype of nerds is the main humor source of this sitcom. Based on the research of Bucholtz (2001), the stereotype of nerds can be divided into two main dimensions: nerds as social underachievers and nerds as intellectual overachievers. In this sitcom, nerds are also represented as sci-fi, comic book and video games fans.

Nerds are considered as socially underachieved because they are represented as underperforming in pragmatic and sociolinguistic dimensions of language. They have trouble adhere to the politeness theory; they have difficulty in comprehending implicature and irony; they are not aware of taboo topics and often fail to consider the setting and scene of a conversation.

Nerds are considered as intellectually overachieved because they tend to employ “superstandard” language, i.e., they employ written and formal register across contexts. They are also represented as constantly demonstrating their intellect and knowledge on various topics. They are also likely to demonstrate their mastery in scientific and technological fields.

Nerds are represented as sci-fi, comic books, and video games fans in this sitcom. They engage in sci-fi works and activities with strong fervor, and they often can recite and quote the lines of sci-fi movies, and constantly debate on the events in the hypothesized universe in sci-fi works.

Ethnic stereotypes are another source of humor in *The Big Bang Theory*. Since one of the five main characters is Jewish, and another is Indian, the stereotype of their

respective ethnicities serves as humor resources. However, the other three Caucasian characters are also parodied in terms of their rural upbringings.

In *The Big Bang Theory*, nerdiness is often represented as being different to non-nerds. The non-nerd girl character often serves as a reference point to nerds in order to demonstrate how deviated from normalcy the nerds are, but in some scenes some of nerds become reference points to contrast extreme nerdiness.

Key words: humor, stereotype, nerd, sitcom, ethnicity

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Table of Contents

Chinese Abstract	i
English Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
List of Tables	viii
List of Figures	ix

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Chapter Two: Literature Review 9

2.1 Indexicality	9
2.2 Nerds and geeks	15
2.3 Humor theory	21
2.4 Politeness theory	25

Chapter Three: Methodology 31

Chapter Four: Data Analysis 38

4.1 Nerds as social underachievers	39
4.1.1 Linguistic performance	40
4.1.1.1 Violation of politeness theory	40
Positive politeness	41
Negative politeness	45
4.1.1.2 Unable to perceive conversational implicature and irony	48
4.1.2 Sociolinguistic incompetence	50
4.1.2.1 Unable to perceive context of setting and scene	51
4.1.2.2 Unable to perceive taboo topics	54
4.1.3 Failure to adapt to social norms	59
4.1.3.1 Social anxiety and awkwardness	59
4.1.3.2 Lack of popular culture knowledge	64
4.1.3.3 Eccentricity	68
4.2 Nerds as intellectual overachievers	72
4.2.1 Linguistic performance: Superstandard language	73
4.2.1.1 Advanced vocabulary	73
4.2.1.2 Formal register structures	76
4.2.1.3 Subtle linguistic nuances	79

4.2.2 Sociolinguistic behaviors	81
4.2.2.1 Demonstration of knowledge	81
4.2.2.2 Demonstration of multilingualism	85
4.2.2.3 In-group humor of nerd	90
4.2.2.4 Metalinguistic comment	92
4.2.3 Technology mastery	93
4.3 Nerds as sci-fi, comic book, and video games fans	96
4.4 Ethnic stereotypes	99
4.4.1 Jewish	99
4.4.2 Indian	104
4.4.3 Other ethnic stereotypes	108
4.5 Mismatch of style	112
4.6 Reference point to nerds	118
Chapter Five: Conclusions	126
References	133

List of Tables

Table 1: List of all known Logical Mechanisms 25

Table 2: Positive and negative politeness 29

List of Figures

Figure 1: Language and gender 12

Figure 2: Incongruity-Resolution Model 22

Chapter One

Introduction

Language is entwined in our understanding of our surroundings. It is an essential tool for every person to situate oneself in a given society, and through this process we gradually become a socialized individual. In other words, language and society are inseparable; language can be regarded as a social phenomenon, and as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests, language can shape what we “see” in our world. Since the 20th century, electronic mass media develops rapidly, to the extent of being ubiquitous as of today. Members of a society in which electronic media is available are sure to be molded and shaped by what they see and what they hear on media. Thus, mass media is one of the most powerful agents of socialization in this process. The content of the media, be it factual (e.g. news reports, documentaries), entertaining (e.g. variety shows, game shows), or fictitious (e.g.. soap operas, sitcoms, dramatic television series, made-for-television movies, etc.), all somehow reflect and affect our visions of the world. While we are receiving the information from the media, the information itself is spoken language. It constitutes the essential content for the audience to receive such information.

Of all the genres in television contents, situation comedy, or sitcom, is one of the most influential genres of television shows in the development of media, as

Winzenburg (2004) suggests. He proposes that “sitcoms are the most popular type of programming on the most influential medium in history and have had a major impact on how we think and what we think about” (2004: 11). Sitcom is serial, that is, the characters in the sitcom can develop through the plots prolonged in numerous episodes, and the humor often derives from running gags. The time frame of a sitcom is mostly contemporary, thus sitcoms reflect contemporary social background and language. Also, the setting of a sitcom is mostly in regular households among friends or family members, or in certain workplaces (mostly in offices) among coworkers. The main events in a sitcom mostly deal with daily lives, chores, office work, friendship, and romantic relationships. Since the settings of sitcoms resemble the common situations in the audience, it comes as no surprise that the audience relates and responds to sitcoms, which contributes to the success of sitcom as a genre. Quaglio (2009) states that viewer identification of sitcoms is achieved through *language* [sic] (2009: 13). Studying sitcoms, especially language in sitcoms, not only helps us understand what is considered humorous, but also helps us understand the mechanisms of language by studying how information is “packaged” during the process of its transmission.

In addition, since the intention of comedy is to make the audience laugh, what the audience finds humorous is also worthy of our concern, because why a certain

linguistic exchange is funny can be attributed to pragmatic and/or sociolinguistic reasons. In previous researches, Hung (2002) discusses at length of Mandarin Chinese cold jokes and the humor mechanism behind them; Shu (2007) analyzes the pragmatic mechanisms and strategies of punchlines in American sitcom *Friends*, also citing review of theories about humor and its related research. In addition, Shu (2007: 1) cites that Raskin (1985) proposed humor competence in his work, and suggested that it should be integrated into the linguistic competence that is central to Chomskyan approach to linguistic studies. Carrell (1997) further argued that joke competence should be differentiated from humor competence. In any case, it is important to understand humorous texts and exchanges to communicate in daily lives. This is probably why sitcoms are so popular among Americans, and eventually in many parts of the world.

The author of this thesis picked out *The Big Bang Theory* as a subject of research for the following reasons: first, it is a rather novel sitcom premiered in September 2007, and it is still on air, meaning that much academic discussion is to be done. Also, the characters and setting of this sitcom is extraordinary: there are four male characters and a female one, but all four males are the so-called “nerds.” The stereotype of nerds is not the first time being shown in Hollywood: Heyman (2008) points out that in the 1963 film and 1996 remake of *The Nutty Professor*, the main

character is a nerdy and socially inept scientist working in a university who invents a potion to transform himself into a savvy, sleek girl-chasing hipster. Also, the *Revenge of the Nerds* film series from the 1980s to the 1990s tell the story of a bunch of nerds studying computer science in college resisting the bullying of jocks and vying for the attention and love of the girls. In television, the protagonist of *CSI*, Dr. Gil Grissom, can also be considered as a nerd. He is a forensic entomologist who works in Las Vegas CSI team, and he is also socially inept and peculiar in his approach during his forensic work. *The Big Bang Theory* is extraordinary in the sense that this is the first sitcom that combines the humor that stems from the stereotype of nerd and accurate science representation. Other than nerds, the sitcom also features other stereotypes, such as ethnic ones. These characters, except for Penny, are not the common people we meet in our daily lives, just as most American sitcom characters; they are all established young scholars working in academia (namely California Institute of Technology). The five central characters are: Dr. Sheldon Cooper, Dr. Leonard Hofstadter, Penny (whose last name remains unknown), Howard Wolowitz, and Dr. Rajesh “Raj” Koothrappali.

Sheldon, a theoretical physicist, has an IQ of 187 and got his first Ph.D. at the age of 16. Now in his late 20s, he is an established scholar in his academic field. However, he acts differently from average people: he adheres to strict routines; he

overly relies on logics; he is somewhat cynical, inconsiderate, and inhumane; he is very dependent on his family and his friends, yet he lacks consideration for them; he lacks knowledge of human interaction, sarcasm, humor and irony, and common popular culture (except for sci-fi themed movies, comics, video games, and online games). To sum up, he has superior knowledge, but his social skills are close to none.

Along the course of the series, Sheldon is established as a breakout character, since he embodies the quintessential nerd, and attracts media and audience attention. Anderton (2010) reports that Denhart (2009) sees the character of Sheldon as “narcissistic, socially awkward, childish, hurtful, naive, irascible, selfish, rude, and irrepressible” yet “extremely popular with viewers and even lovable”. He also states that

Sheldon is the ultimate sardonic outsider who’s unaware and unconcerned of the implications of his observations, from which the show derives the bulk of the humor. While his statements often stem directly from his vast intelligence, he's so smart and detached from normal human interaction that he's frequently a jerk. Sheldon is brutally honest, often unaware of the implications of his observations, including his friends' hurt feelings.

Leonard is Sheldon’s roommate, and is Sheldon’s best friend. Also a child prodigy like Sheldon, he is a successful experimental physicist. He is aware that he is a nerd, and he tries very hard to engage in social activities. He has a crush on Penny, their new neighbor, when she moves into the apartment building in the very first episode. He shares the hobby of Sheldon’s, but he always longs for Penny’s attention.

The sexual tension between Leonard and Penny serves as a main storyline in the series. In season three, Leonard and Penny eventually become couples, but they split up before the season ends. Despite the fact that they are no longer a couple, they still remain friends.

Penny is the only main female character in the series, and she can be seen as the antithesis of the four nerdy men. She comes from Nebraska to Los Angeles to become an actress, but is currently working as a waitress. She did not go to college, nor is she specially gifted in any technical field, but she is approachable, energetic, perky, has great social skills, and is knowledgeable about common popular culture. The difference between her and the four men, especially Sheldon, is also one of the sources of the humor in *The Big Bang Theory*. Penny can be considered as a reference character for the nerds.

Howard is an aerospace engineer who always hangs out with Sheldon, Leonard, and Raj, as they share the passion about everything sci-fi and *Star Wars*. He is currently living with his overbearing mother, and unlike the other nerds, does not own a Ph.D. degree, which bothers Sheldon very much (although he has a master's degree from MIT, as he often emphasizes when questioned about his intelligence). He sees himself as a "ladies man" and often uses socially inappropriate language to seduce any woman surrounding him, including Penny. Since his Jewish ethnicity is

repeatedly emphasized in the series, the punchlines about Howard are often based on his Jewish upbringing and his flamboyant language.

Raj is an Indian astrophysicist working in the United States. He suffers from serious social anxiety, to the extent that he has selective mutism, which means that he is unable to speak when there are women other than his female family members around him. When Penny is with them, he is always silent, and whispers into Howard's ear if he has something to say. However, under the influence of alcohol, he transforms into a womanizer and speaks with sleek language, and often brands himself as a poor but intelligent young scholar coming from an exotic subcontinent, but in actuality his family is very rich. In addition, although he comes from New Delhi and is well-educated, it is made clear in the series that his mother tongue is English, and he always speaks English, even when talking to his family via webcam. Nevertheless, he demonstrates some knowledge of Hindi in certain episodes.

These characters' attributes and special backgrounds bring about some possible research questions. This thesis aims to explore:

- (1) What are the sociolinguistic factors that the script writers employ to construct stereotypes, and in this sitcom, mainly nerds? Is there any other kind of stereotypes that are incorporated into this sitcom?
- (2) How are pragmatic strategies employed to help represent the stereotypes in

The Big Bang Theory?

- (3) What is the relationship between do sociolinguistic factors and pragmatic strategies in forming stereotypes, such as nerds?

The first research question deals with how the writers of this sitcom construct stereotypes. There is a specific social group that is depicted in this sitcom, namely nerds. What are the stereotypes that nerds are represented? And how do these stereotypes come to be realized by the script writers and the audience as humorous?

The second question aims to sort out the pragmatic mechanisms of humor. Since the goal of a sitcom is to make audience laugh, what are the pragmatic strategies employed in *The Big Bang Theory* in order to make the content humorous?

Finally, what is the relationship between sociolinguistic factors and pragmatic strategies in making the sitcom script humorous? How can we come to understand the humor in this sitcom is not only based on sociolinguistic or pragmatic reasons, but on the relationships between the two major factors?

To sum up, this research aims to observe the sociolinguistic implications in this series from an outsider and an audience point of view, hoping to decode the perception of the American society of the particular social group of nerds through sociolinguistic analysis of the script.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

In order to interpret the data of *The Big Bang Theory*, some issues must be tackled first. This chapter reviews some studies that have been done and theories that have been established to perceive the humor in sitcoms. The covered topics are: (1) the notion of indexicality; (2) nerd as a social group in American society, (3) humor research, and (4) politeness theory.

2.1 Indexicality

Bucholtz (2001) provides us with a simple definition of indexicality, “Indexicality involves the establishment of a connection between a linguistic form and its social significance through the recognition of their repeated conjunction; although there is no inevitable tie between form and meaning, it eventually come to be seen as inevitable hence ideological” (2001: 88). In Irvine & Gal’s (2000) study on language ideology, this process of indexicality is called iconization. Any language, or any specific linguistic trait, is seen to be inherent, iconic, and reflective of the essential characters of its users. Since languages rely on people to speak it, somehow the connection between a speaker and a language, a linguistic structure, or a style, is established. This connection between a speaker and his/her language is not only of juxtaposition but of resemblance.

In her influential study on indexicality of language, Ochs (1992) undertakes her research from gender and language, and states that

Sociological and anthropological studies of language behavior are predicated on the assumptions that (1) language systematically varies across social contexts and (2) such variation is part of the meaning indexed by linguistic structures. Sociolinguistic studies tend to relate particular structures to particular situational conditions, or clusters of structures to such conditions. The meanings so indexed are referred to as social meanings, in contrast to purely referential or logical meaning expressed by linguistic structures.

(1992: 337-38)

That is to say, every competent member of a given speech community is able to interpret the social meanings of a linguistic structure, be it phonetic (e.g. rhoticization or not in Taiwan Mandarin), phonological (r-coloring vowels in American English versus the lack of r-coloring vowels in British English), morphological (sentence final morphological particles *-ze* and *-wa* in Japanese), grammatical (lack of copula verbs in AAVE), or pragmatic (the discourse function of *dude* among younger generations in the U.S., see Kiesling (2004)). Members in these respective speech communities are able to identify what kind of age, class, ethnicity, race, gender when a speaker shows or lacks such linguistic trait, and at the same time, they “give away” their background information the moment they begin to speak. In other words, we judge others, and are judged by others, from the words that come out from our mouth.

This kind of social meaning is systematic, and can be indexed by language

structure. Ochs cited philosophers Bahtkin (1981) and Vološinov (1973), and they state that utterances may have several “voices.” When a piece of information, encoded with language, is in the process of transmission, the voices of speaker/writer may blend into the message, and then turn into part of the social meanings indexed within the message. Social context can also be indexed either referentially or non-referentially. Silverstein (1985) proposes that referential indexes are a major source of linguistic construction of gender ideology. Take third person pronoun for example, if you address someone as “Mister”, the audience can identify that the addressee must be a male adult. However, non-referential indexes are the majority from a sociolinguistic viewpoint. For example, voice pitch is an index of speaker’s gender. We can not choose the pitch of our own voice, but we judge each other’s gender when voice pitch is the only available measure, for example, in telephone conversations. Thus, pitch has its social meanings in its own right, and through the process of socialization, every member of the society acquires this way to distinguish male and female.

Ochs postulates a figure that shows how language and gender form a constitutive relation. She indicates that “one or more linguistic features may index social meanings (e.g. stances, social acts, social activities), which in turn helps to constitute gender meanings” (1992: 341). The relation between language and gender is

constituted by a web of socially organized pragmatic meanings:

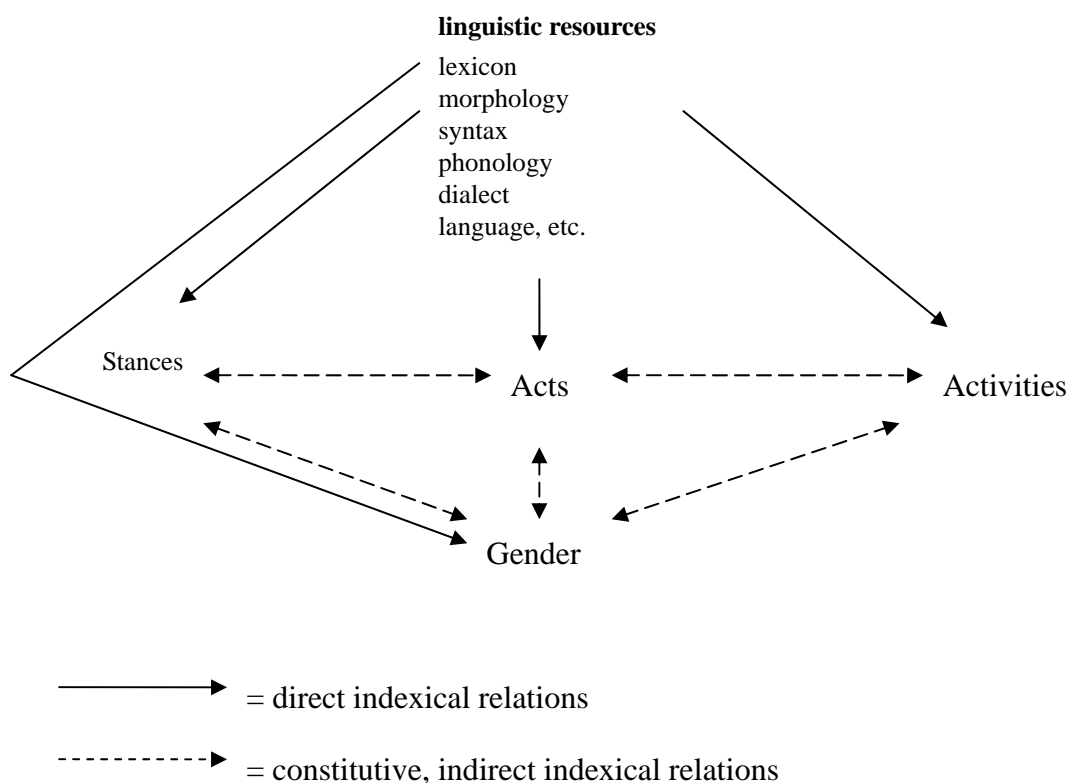


Figure 1: Language and gender (Ochs 1992: 342)

Figure 1 shows that linguistic resources can directly index to stances, acts, social activities, and gender (through referential indexes such as “she,” “Miss,” or “little girl”). But the relations between stances, acts, social activities and gender are constitutive, that is, indirectly indexed. Researches on indexicality and language aim to discover such indirect relations.

Eckert (2008) provides us an account of variation and the indexical field. She argues that the meaning of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings—an *indexical field*, or constellation of ideology related

meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable. The construction of ideology is rooted in variation. This indexical system “embeds ideology in language and that is in turn part and parcel of the construction of ideology” (2008: 453).

For traditional variationist sociolinguists, the spread of sound change and its meaning in a society is the main focus of their researches. Labov (1971) distinguishes between indicators, markers, and stereotypes. As Eckert (2008) cited, in Labov’s terms, “*indicators* are dialectal variables that distinguish social or geographic categories but have no notice and do not figure in variation across the formality continuum”, while “*markers* and *stereotypes* are variables that have attracted sufficient attention to emerge within those categories in stylistic variation”(2008: 463). The way to tell the difference between markers and stereotypes is that the former are not subject to metapragmatic discussion, while the latter does. Indicators, in Silverstein’s (2003) terms, are *first-order index*, they only indexes membership in a population. When social meanings are attached to a linguistic trait, they become markers, or *second-order index*. A form with an indexical value is termed an *nth order usage*, and is always available for reinterpretation, that is, the social meaning between form and meaning is made and remade. It can acquire an *n+1st value*. This is the result of an ideological move, and eventually expands to an indexical field.

Campbell-Kibler (2007) reports on (ING) pronunciation and the indexical field of its pronunciation in the United States. She demonstrated that hearers associate velar variant with education, intelligence, articulateness, formality, effortful pronunciation, but it also indexes pretentious and distance, while the apical variant was interpreted by the listeners as uneducated, lazy, inarticulate, but relaxed, easygoing, and unpretentious. The positive and negative impressions that one has toward the speakers of these (ING) variants are based on the judgments of the hearer. While every member may agree on who uses what variant (i.e. first-order indexicality), the ideological orientations of hearers can be polar opposite: some like the velar variant because they think the speakers of this variant can be powerful, formal, polite, educated, etc., while others do not like the speakers of it because the speakers can be pretentious, insincere, or condescending.

One important idea about indexical field is that the indexes are fluid, that is, some indexes are of more permanent qualities, and others are of temporary stances. In the case of /t/ articulation in American English, Eckert (2008) reports that the hyperarticulation of /t/ releases are found in various unrelated social categories: nerd girls (Bucholtz 2001, Moore & Podesva 2009), Orthodox Jewish boys (Benor 2001), and gay men (Podesva, Roberts and Campbell-Kibler 2002). /t/ release is used by nerd girls to characterize themselves as intellectual mavericks; it is used by Orthodox

Jewish boys to show they receive traditional Jewish religious education; it is also one of the features of stereotypical gay speech. From this example we can see that a single linguistic element can be attached to many different social meanings when used by different people in different contexts. It is suffice to prove that language carries more weight than just grammatical forms and semantic meanings.

After watching the sitcom, it is safe to state that the general audience responds to the punchlines that corresponds to the stereotype of nerds. From a linguistic point of view, some linguistic behaviors, such as being pragmatically incapable of having appropriate conversations and often demonstrating anecdotal knowledge on various topics, are indexing nerdiness. The audience is aware of such index so that they find the sitcom funny.

2.2 Nerds and geeks

The basic definition of nerd is someone who is “an unstylish, unattractive, or socially inept person; *especially* [sic] one slavishly devoted to intellectual or academic pursuits” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). Merriam-Webster Dictionary cites the children’s book *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss (1950) as the earliest written occurrence (“And then, just to show them, I’ll sail to Ka-Troo and Bring Back an It-Kutch, a Preep and a Proo, a Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker, too!”), in which a nerd is a fictitious creature, Eglash (2002) reports that the earliest use in its contemporary sense

was cited from student-produced burlesque at Swarthmore College in 1960. The term was not in common usage until the 1970s, when it became a stock phrase on the American sitcom *Happy Days* (2002: 61). Bucholtz (2001) defines nerds as “members of a stigmatized social category who are stereotypically cast as intellectual overachievers and social underachievers” (2001: 85). Kendall (2000) cites an online test (the Nerdity Test) which specifies the characteristics of a nerd: “fascination with technology, interest in science fiction and related media such as comic books, and perceived or actual social ineptitude and sartorial disorganization” (2000: 262). The character of nerd is also stereotypically gender-specific to men, as Kendall (2000) cites Cockburn (1985: 12), “Technology enters into our sexual identity; femininity is incompatible with technological competence; to feel technically competent is to feel manly.” This generally explains why women do not occupy the stereotypical image of a nerd.

As for geek, Eglash (2002) does not make distinction between this word and nerd. He uses nerd and geek interchangeably to reduce repetition (2002: 64). Merriam-Webster Dictionary suggests that geek is: (1) a carnival performer often billed as a wild man whose act usually includes biting the head off a live chicken or snake; (2) a person often of an intellectual bent who is disliked; and (3) an enthusiast or expert especially in a technological field or activity, i.e. a computer geek. The first

meaning of geek is completely unrelated to the topic concerned here, so it can be neglected, but the second and the third meaning overlap with the definition of nerd. The shared meaning between geek and nerd is that they both refer to people who are intellectually superior but is socially inept, but geek tends to collocate with “computer”. However, it is not surprising that nerds are superior in the knowledge of computer science, or any other sub-disciplinary of science, thus it seems that the term nerd is much more general than geek, and this is the reason why the author of this thesis chooses the word “nerd” and “nerdy” to refer to the people with such quality in this work.

Some researches about language and nerds have been done. Bucholtz (1999) takes a viewpoint of “community of practice” toward the research on language and identity practices in a community of nerd girls. She defines nerds as people who oppose “cool” stance, or any other social identity (1999: 211). She cites Eckert (1989), “If a Jock is the opposite of a Burnout, a nerd is the opposite of both.” Bucholtz also regards nerds as people who “to a great extent consciously choose and display their identities through language and other social practices” (1999: 211), and nerds in American high schools “are not socially isolated misfits, but competent members of a distinctive and oppositionally defined community of practice” (1999: 211). Bucholtz (1998) also stated that nerd identity is linguistically indexed through their linguistic

practices on various levels. There are some linguistic practices employed by nerds, some of them can be categorized as “negative identity practices,” that is, they establish their nerd identity by not employing certain linguistic features, such as resistance to colloquial phonological processes such as vowel reduction, consonant-cluster simplification, and contraction; avoidance of nonstandard syntactic forms; avoidance of current slang. Other practices can be categorized as “positive identity practices,” such as employment of superstandard and hypercorrect phonological forms, adherence to standard and superstandard syntactic forms, employment of lexical items associated with the formal register (e.g. Greco-Latinate forms), and orientation to language form.

Bucholtz (2001) continues her research of nerds and proposes that nerds use a special variety of English, namely “superstandard English.” Standard English in the U.S. can be seen as “the notion of an idealized prescriptive standard, usually based on formal written language, and the spoken vernacular believed most closely to approximate it” (2001: 87-88). However, there are differences between the spoken Standard English and formal written Standard English. Superstandard English, as Bucholtz terms the variety of English used by nerds, has following features: “lexical formality, carefully articulated phonological forms, and prescriptively standard grammar” (2001: 88). This variety of English surpasses the prescriptive norm

established by the standard, hence the name “superstandard.” Nevertheless, superstandard English occasionally over-applies the prescriptive grammatical rules and produces hypercorrect forms, which is extremely marked from the point of view of the linguistic ideology in the U.S. Bucholtz also notes that superstandard English “draws on the prescriptive standard, it also contributes to the linguistic ideologies that elevate one linguistic variety over others” (2001: 88). This ideology is compatible to the image of the nerds, since they are highly intelligent. In the society where high IQ is considered an advantage over others, this variety adds the flavor of nerds being in an elevated position in the society. Bucholtz further argues that superstandard English is considered to be a racialized style, that is, it is white-exclusive. She points out that this notion is likewise a work of ideology.

In another research related to nerds, Moore & Podesva (2009) study the style, indexicality, and the social meaning of tag questions. They launched an ethnographical research in a high school in northwest England, and they discovered that four small social groups of girls in this school have different styles of employing tag questions, and these tags produced by the girls index to different qualities, since these four groups have completely different social protocols and attitudes within a group. One of the four groups is the geek girls. Moore & Podesva conclude that geek girls use more conservative phonology, and when talking about relationship with boys,

geek girls tend to “offer their opinions and views about hypothetical relationships, with generic *you*” (2009: 473). They are more prone to talk with an objective voice, and sometimes they use tags to demonstrate their knowledge or to show their ability to engage in a discussion with an authoritative tone. Tags are employed by the geek girls to establish authority and power onto the addressee; this is an exceptional phenomenon unique to the group of geek girls.

Eglash (2002) discusses at length on the relations among nerds, race, and gender, and how the nerd identity has become a “gatekeeper in science and technology participation” (2002: 49). He cites one previous research done by Turkle (1984):

Turkle (1984) vividly describes nerd self-identity in her ethnographic study of undergraduate men at MIT. In one social event “they flaunt their pimples, their pasty complexions, their knobby knees, their thin, underdeveloped bodies” (196); in interviews they describe themselves as losers and loners who have given up bodily pleasure in general and sexual relations in particular. But Turkle notes that this physical self-loathing is compensated for by technological mastery.

(Eglash 2002: 49)

From this citation, one can see that being a nerd is not always negative and undesirable: their social awkwardness and ineptitude are compensated by their technological mastery. That is to say that nerds are masculine, but different from traditional masculinity. They may lack the force, power and the violence that traditional masculinity requires, but they make it up with their knowledge and control of technology. This aspect of nerds is represented in *The Big Bang Theory*.

2.3 Humor Theory

Since the 1970s, humor research has begun to develop, and to this day, it is now an independent discipline of study itself. The most established humor theories are: Incongruity-Resolution Theory, Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor, and finally Raskin and Attardo's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humor. See Hung (2002) and Shu (2007) for a more detailed account on these theories.

The original Incongruity-Resolution Theory (IRT) is proposed in the 1970s, and it explains how a joke works: the joke consists of two parts, namely the set-up of the joke and the punchline of the joke. There is always some level of discrepancy, known here as incongruity, between the set-up and the punchline of a joke; when the hearer of the joke detects such incongruity, his or her cognition will try to resolve such incongruity. If the incongruity is resolved, that is, the hearer reinterprets the set-up, and the less obvious interpretation is evoked, and so is the humor. If the incongruity is not solved, the hearer will not be able to reinterpret the set-up, and no other interpretation will be evoked, and neither is humor. When this situation happens, the hearer will not regard the joke as funny, or feel puzzled and lost, or even question the validity of the said joke. The model of incongruity resolution is represented in the following figure (cited from Hung 2002: 6):

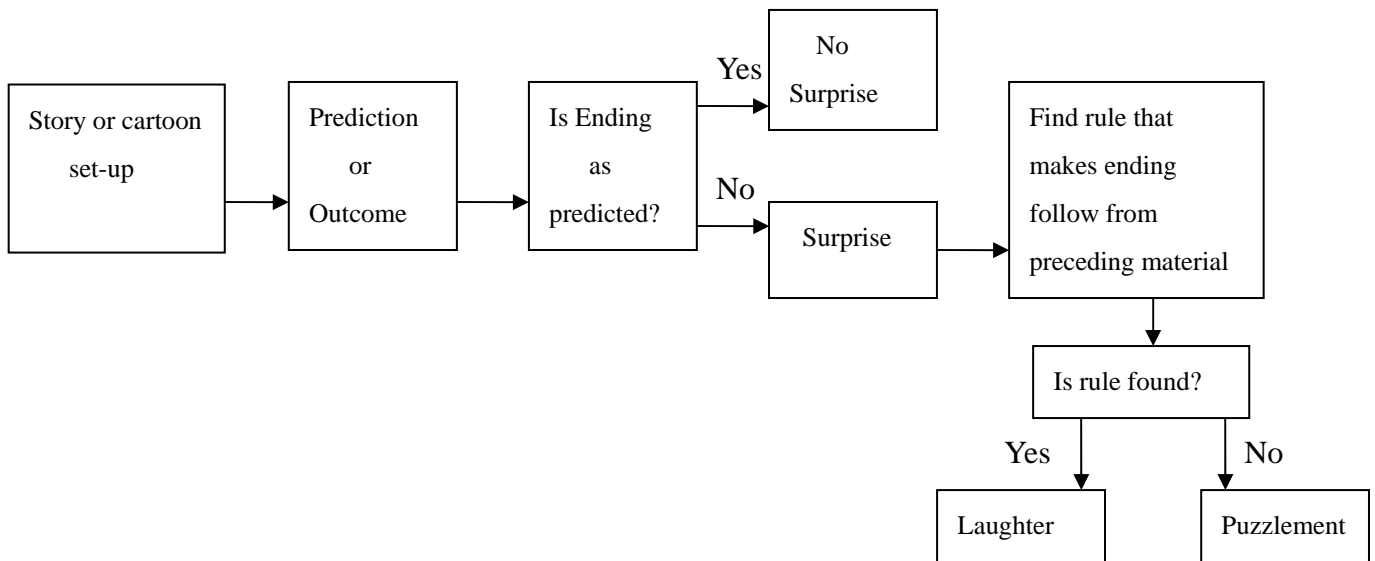


Figure 2: Incongruity-Resolution Model (adopted from “A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation of Jokes and Cartoons”, by J. Sul 1972)

In Figure 2, when one reads a story or a cartoon set-up, one would predict the ending. If the ending is just like what is predicted, then there is no surprise, hence no humor. If the ending is not like what is predicted, incongruity ensues. At this stage, one must find a solution to the surprise in order to make sense of the whole story. If a rule is found to explain the joke, one laughs at this joke; if no such rule is found, one would feel puzzled, and don't “get” the joke. This model is essentially a cognitive approach into humor.

In Raskin's Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), the notion of “scripts” is brought into the analysis of joke. SSTH is the first effort to theorize verbal humor. It does not concern non-verbal humor, i.e. humor without a text, such as funny costumes,

poses, facial expressions or movements. Likewise, the non-verbal humor of *The Big Bang Theory* will not be part of the data. SSTH focuses on the joke hearer's cognition of two compatible yet somewhat conflicting scripts. Jokes consist of two overlapping scripts, and only one of them is revealed at the beginning of the joke. The other script is hidden until the punchline appears. Once the punchline appears, the joke hearer will activate another script. That is, the set-up of a joke begins with a script, but the punchline forces the hearer to backtrack and reinterpret the joke text with another script (De Mey 2005: 73). According to Raskin, ambiguity and contradiction triggers the switch of semantic script.

Attardo & Raskin (1991) and Attardo (1994) further revise the SSTH into General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). GTVH introduces six Knowledge Resources (KR) that serve as parameters of jokes. These parameters are:

(1) Script Opposition (SO)

A script is an interpretation of a joke. SO refers to the fact that there must be two opposing yet compatible script in a joke. Lack of SO will not produce any humor. This parameter is also required in SSTH.

(2) Logical Mechanism (LM)

This parameter deals with how the two scripts in the joke are brought together.

(3) Situation (SI)

Jokes must set a situation: who the participants are and when and where the event takes place.

(4) Narrative Strategy (NS)

NS concerns with the narrative organization of the joke: a story, a riddle, a dialogue, etc.

(5) Target (TA)

Target refers to the individual, or the group, that the joke makes fun of.

(6) Language (LA)

This parameter refers to all levels of linguistic elements when verbalizing a joke.

By combining the different values of these parameters, one can (theoretically) generate an infinite number of jokes, i.e.

Joke: {SO, LM, SI, NS, TA, LA}

Attardo (1997) argues that Incongruity-Resolution Theory can be mapped onto GTVH. The parameter of Script Opposition corresponds to the incongruity part, while the parameter of Logical Mechanism corresponds to the resolution part. These two parameters are crucial in making a joke. If these two parts are omitted, then the produced text can hardly be understood as a joke. Attardo (2002) further delves into

the parameter of Logical Mechanism, and proposes a list of all known logical mechanisms:

Role reversals	Potency mappings	Role exchanges
Vacuous reversal	Chiasmus	Juxtapositions
Garden path	Faulty reasoning	Figure ground reversal
Almost situations	Self-undermining	Analogy
Inferring consequences	Missing link	Reasoning from false premises
Coincidence	Implicit Parallelism	Parallelism
Proportion	False analogy	Ignoring the obvious
Exaggeration	Cratyism	Field restriction
Metahumor	Referential Ambiguity	Vicious cycle

Table 1: List of all known Logical Mechanisms (Attardo 2002, cited in Shu 2007: 21-22)

In the data, example of some Logical Mechanisms can be found, such as “Exaggeration,” “Role reversals,” and “Ignoring the obvious” can be found. But in *The Big Bang Theory*, very often the Target of the joke is nerd, and it is framed that these Logical Mechanisms are indexical to nerds, that is, these are the behaviors nerds tend to do. Of course, the Target can shift to non-nerds (as a comparison between nerds and non-nerds) or people of certain ethnicity, but the main focus is the nerds.

2.4 Politeness Theory

Politeness has gained much attention in the study of pragmatics in the last forty years. Thomas (1995) reports that since the late 1970s, vast literature has been built up to tackle on issues of politeness, register, and deference. Politeness is a strategy that the interlocutors employ in order to achieve their goals. Contexts are required in

the study of politeness. Brown & Levinson (1987) propose a complete model of politeness theory, and point out that flouting the maxims of Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle is the strategy that interlocutors employ to be linguistically polite.

Cooperative principle is proposed by H. P. Grice in 1975, and this principle is so influential that this set of principle is called the Gricean maxims. The four maxims are:

(1) Maxim of quantity

Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

(2) Maxim of quality

Do not say what you believe to be false

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

(3) Maxim of manner

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief

Be orderly

(4) Maxim of relevance

Be relevant.

Cooperative principle explains how linguistic interactions are done. People observe cooperative principle so that the conversation can continue smoothly. If any interlocutor does not follow this principle at all, communication will break down and no further linguistic interaction can be made. In a conversation, the speaker generally

follows the cooperative principle and the addressee generally assumes that the speaker follows it. When a turn is made, the speaker and the addressee exchanges position, and the cooperative principle is still observed, resulting in smooth communication, until they stop talking to each other.

The above example is the ideal of communication. Notice that the speaker *generally* follows this principle and the addressee *generally* assumes that the speaker follows it. This means that it is possible that either the speaker or the addressee does not follow this principle, and when this happens, the issue of implicature rises. In a sitcom, the lines of characters are written before the shooting begins, thus the script writer must create some lines that flouts the cooperative principle in order to make the audience laugh. Although in naturally-occurring conversations, implicature does not necessarily create humor, but in sitcom scripts, the lines are constructed to be humorous to fulfill the purpose of sitcom. In Shu (2007), one can see that in *Friends*, there are 5,164 tokens of flouting maxims of CP out of a total of 14,005 funny lines (2007: 39-40).

Leech (1983) proposes that politeness is the reason why we speak indirectly, and this is an obvious violation of Grice's maxim of quantity. He introduces, in his classic *Principles of Pragmatics*, the Politeness Principle (PP):

Minimize (all things being equal) the expression of impolite beliefs; maximize (all things being equal) the expressions of polite beliefs.

Leech states that PP explains why speakers do not always observe Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP). Speaking indirectly is a choice and a strategy made by speakers in order to adhere to the PP. Brown & Levinson (1987) appropriates Goffman's (1967) concept of "face" and postulates that the management of face is essential when dealing with politeness. The origin of the term comes from a Chinese concept of *diulian* (丟臉), which can be roughly translated into "being ashamed of oneself after doing something worthy of condemnation". It is constantly directly translated into English literally as "losing face". We can also "save face," that is, do not do all things shameful. Thomas (1995) explains that in politeness theory, face "is best understood as every individual's feeling of self-worth or self-image" (1995: 169). Grundy (2008) states that face can be comparable to self-esteem, and in most encounters, our face is put at risk; therefore, it is necessary that our face be compensated by the use of redressive language in order to satisfy the need of face of our interlocutors. Foley (1997) proposes that "Face is linguistically constructed, and the ability to use verbal skills with facility is how we can manipulate a social encounter to maximize our face gains and minimize our losses" (1997: 270). According to Brown & Levinson (1987), there are two kinds of face: positive face and negative face. Grundy (2008) reviews their work:

Positive face is a person's wish to be well thought of. Its manifestations may include the desire to have what we admire admired by others, the desire to be understood by others, and the desire to be treated as a friend and a confidant ... Negative face is our wish not to be imposed on by others and to be allowed to go about our business unimpeded with our rights to free and self-determined action intact.

(2008: 195-196)

Grundy (2008) also cited Brown and Levinson's (1987) list of positive and

negative politeness:

Positive politeness	Negative politeness
Notice/attend to hearer's wants Exaggerate interest/approval Intensify interest Use in-group identity markers Seek agreement Presuppose/assert common ground Joke Assert knowledge of hearer's wants Offer promise Be optimistic Include speaker and hearer in the activity Give (or ask for reasons) Assume/assert reciprocity Give gifts to hearer (goods, sympathy, etc.)	Be conventionally indirect Question, hedge Be pessimistic Minimize imposition Give deference Apologize Impersonalize State the imposition as a general rule Normalize Go on record as incurring a debt

Table 2: Positive and negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987:102, 131, cited in Grundy 2008: 199)

Since we are constantly under the threat of losing our face, there are some strategies that one can employ when he or she wants to perform a face-threatening act (FTA). In Brown & Levinson's (1987) model, these are the strategies to perform such

an act:

1. Do the act on-record
 - (a) baldly, without redress
 - (b) with positive-politeness redress
 - (c) with negative-politeness redress
2. Do the act off-record
3. Do not do the act

(cited in Grundy 2008: 197)

As a speaker, we have to calculate which of the five strategies above that fits the context the best. Of course, we can also employ multiple strategies to fashion our language should we intend to perform an FTA. Grundy (2008) proposes an equation:

Social Distance + Power Differential + Degree of Imposition = degree of face
threat to be compensated by appropriate linguistic strategy
(Grundy 2008: 197)

It is through this calculation that a speaker chooses to employ what kind of strategy when performing FTAs. Grundy also suggests that in television sitcoms, the miscalculation of such equation serves as a humor resource because this is one of the ways to mark incongruous politeness status of an utterance. Judging from the data collected, this is indeed one of the humor strategies used by the writers of the *Big Bang Theory*.

Chapter Three

Methodology

The first three seasons of *The Big Bang Theory* are the data of this research. There are 63 episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* in the corpus. The lines of the four nerdy characters (Leonard, Sheldon, Howard, and Raj) will be the main point of this research, since the goal is to examine how language contributes to character building as nerds. The lines of Penny and other minor and recurring characters will be taken into consideration if necessary, since they often serve the function of a reference point to the four nerds. In addition, the research focuses on sociolinguistic aspects of humor, thus non-verbal humor, such as eccentric movements or peculiar facial expressions performed by actors, are excluded from the discussion.

The reason why one can directly claim that the four men are nerds are implied on the official website of this sitcom, since it is the premise and the main source of humor of the show. In the section of “About the show”, it says:

Leonard and Sheldon are brilliant physicists, the kind of "beautiful minds" that understand how the universe works. But none of that genius helps them interact with people, especially women. All this begins to change when a free-spirited beauty named Penny moves in next door. Sheldon, Leonard's roommate, is quite content spending his nights playing Klingon Boggle with their socially dysfunctional friends, fellow CalTech scientists Wolowitz and Koothrappali. However, Leonard sees in Penny a whole new universe of possibilities... including love.

(cited from CBS *The Big Bang Theory* website, section “About”)

From the introduction about the show, one can see that the four characters have “beautiful minds,” a direct reference to the biography of the mathematician John Forbes Nash, Jr. and the popular film adaptation starring Russell Crowe. Nash is a Nobel Prize laureate in Economics, and received his Ph.D. degree at the age of 22. He is a genius, as praised by Nash’s MA thesis advisor (Nasar 2001, xii); however, beginning from his 30s, he was plagued by paranoid schizophrenia that has troubled him for decades. Nash is a quintessential example that excellence of knowledge of someone does not help him/her engage in the society. The comparison between John Forbes Nash Jr. and the four nerds are obvious: they are extremely smart, but lack the ability to adapt to the society as a whole. The four nerds are depicted as having trouble with interacting with people, especially with women; they are “content with playing Klingon boggle,” and are “socially dysfunctional.” The qualities of nerds are introduced in this excerpt: they are sci-fi fans, and they are social underachievers. Penny, on the contrary, is introduced as a “free-spirited beauty,” thus one can see that she is not a nerd because nerds are not in any way “free-spirited”.

Since the language in sitcoms is not naturally-occurring language, we should not treat the data as many researchers do when they conduct their studies with naturally-occurring language as data. Rather, an audience perspective will be taken to see how truthful the playwrights of the show represent and depict the linguistic

practices of the nerds, or the deliberate violation of the linguistic practices of this social group. In addition, the audience of a sitcom may have all the presuppositions necessary to perceive an exchange hilarious, but the character in the sitcom may not.

In the vein of humor research, laughter is regarded as a proof of humor, but the segmentation of the data is not divided according to laughter, but to topic chains. Following Chui (2002), this study treats topic chain as “a sequence of clauses about the same subject matter” or phrases that are semantically-related. There are different levels of topic chains, and there may be subdivisions within a topic chain.

An example of dividing topic chains is presented below. In this episode, Leonard and Penny had broken up, but Sheldon wants to keep his friendship with Penny. Howard and Raj warned him that it is inadequate to hang out with your best friend’s ex-girlfriend. However, Penny offers to cook spaghetti, his favorite food, for Sheldon, and Sheldon accepts the offer. He insists that hot dogs must be cut into dices and added in the spaghetti. Penny runs out of hot dogs, so Sheldon tries to smuggle some out of his refrigerator without being discovered by Leonard, Howard and Raj by hiding these frozen hot dogs in his pants.

Example (from 320)²

←TC 13→

(Sheldon and Howard are downstairs)

² 320 means Season 3 Episode 20. The first digit means season number and the last two digits refer to the episode number.

Sheldon: Say hello to your mother for me.

Howard: OK. (opens the front door, while Sheldon stands still) **(laughter)**

Sheldon: What? **(laughter)**

Howard: You said you're going for a walk.

Sheldon: I didn't say outside. **(laughter)**

Howard: So what, you're just gonna walk up and down the stairs?

Sheldon: No, of course not. **(laughter)** That would be odd and suspicious behavior. **(laughter)**

(They walk outside the building)

←TC 14→

A woman passing by: Come on, ...! Here boy! (calling her dog)

←TC 15→

Howard: **Which way are you going?**

Sheldon: Which way are you going? **(laughter)**

Howard: I parked my scooter down the block=

Sheldon: =I am going the other way. Bye (not moving). **(laughter)**

Howard: Bye. (leaves, and turns around) Actually it's this way. **(laughter)**

(Sheldon and Howard walk along)

←TC 16→

Howard: **Do I smell hot dogs?** **(laughter)**

Sheldon: No. I mean I've no idea what you smell. **(laughter)**

Howard: I definitely smell raw hot dogs.

Sheldon: Perhaps you're getting a brain tumor. **(laughter)**

(Howard arrives at his scooter)

←TC 17→

Howard: **Alright.** Have a nice walk.

Sheldon: I shall. Have a nice scoot. **(laughter)**

Howard: You might want to stand back, as I sit on top of 13 horses here **(laughter)**

(Howard leaves riding his scooter, Sheldon waves goodbye) **(laughter)**

←TC 18→

(A ferocious dog appears in front of Sheldon) **(laughter)**

Sheldon: Oh, hello, doggie. Nice doggie.

(The dog barks) **(laughter)**

Sheldon: I bet you think you smell hot dogs. **(laughter)**

(The dog barks loudly)

Sheldon: (points) Look, a cat! **(laughter)**

(Sheldon runs away. The dog chases him) **(laughter)**

In the excerpt above, TC 13 begins with Sheldon and Howard coming down to the first floor of the apartment building, signaling a change of place. They walk out of the door, and a woman passes by and calling for her dog. TC 14 is marked because of the introduction of a new character. TC 15 begins directly without any markers because they just got out of the door, and naturally they have to talk about which way to go, since they are heading for different destinations. TC 16 is designated because Howard brings a new topic into their talk; in this case, he smells hot dogs. TC 17 begins with “alright” a boundary marker, and what follows it is another topic, namely Sheldon and Howard bid goodbye to each other, and ends with Howard’s departure. TC 18 begins with a new character into the situation, in this TC a ferocious dog appears, going after the hot dogs Sheldon has been hiding in his pants.

In comparison with Shu’s (2007) and Wen’s (2006) segmentation, the method of conversational topic chains is selected because punchlines in *The Big Bang Theory* often carries sociolinguistic significance. The punchlines not only employs pragmatic strategies of humor, but also a representation of a certain kind of stereotype. In Shu’s (2007) research of *Friends*, pragmatic strategies of humor are her main focus, thus segmenting her data with laughter are applicable. In Wen’s (2006) study of *Waiting for Godot*, the data is a literary work that belongs to the theater of absurd, and the author of this play does not intend to represent daily conversation, thus it is applicable

to segment the data with punctuation marks. Since *The Big Bang Theory* is a sitcom with live audience, and sitcom usually reflects naturally-occurring conversation (see Quaglio (2009)), it is not a literary work, so it is impossible to segment the data with punctuation marks. Also, unlike *Friends*, the premise of *The Big Bang Theory* is to bring nerds into center stage and nerdiness is the main source of humor, the sociolinguistic factors must be considered when interpreting the data. Segmenting the data laughter by laughter is unable to emphasize its sociolinguistic significance.

The data analysis will focus on the stereotypes of nerd as a humor resource. According to Bucholtz (2001), nerds are “members of a stigmatized social category who are stereotypically cast as intellectual overachievers and social underachievers” (2001: 85). The punchlines that contribute to the stereotype of nerds will be sorted into two major categories, “social underachievers” and “intellectual overachievers”. Other stereotype-related punchlines, such as obsession of sci-fi genre works, ethnic stereotypes, and mismatch of styles will be three other categories.

Nerds are regarded as people who are social underachievers and intellectual achievers: they are awkward in social situations, i.e., they feel a certain degree of anxiety when socializing with other people, or they do not have good conversational skills. However, they are intellectually superior, and are enthusiastic about knowledge and facts. In terms of linguistic performance, they tend to use formal register across

contexts, since this register of language is considered to be more precise than colloquial register. The enthusiasm of nerds also shows in sci-fi genre of films, novels, comic books, memorabilia, etc. The sociolinguistic analysis aims to examine how these stereotypes are portrayed as humorous in this sitcom. In addition to the stereotype of nerds, the stereotype of ethnicity will also be discussed since two of the four nerds in the sitcom constantly make reference to their own ethnicity. The emphasis of categorization of the data will cater to the dimensions of nerd stereotypes.

Chapter Four

Data Analysis

With 63 episodes of *The Big Bang Theory* in the corpus, some of the topic chains of the script will be discussed in this chapter to demonstrate how the playwrights of this comedy represent the image of nerds through the manipulation of language and the techniques of language use.

There are altogether 2130 topic chains (TCs), 892 sub-topic chains (sub-TCs), 158 sub-sub-topic chains (sub-sub-TCs), 14 sub-sub-sub-topic chains (sub-sub-sub-TCs), and 1 sub-sub-sub-sub-topic chain (sub-sub-sub-sub-TC) in the data. The boundary of TCs and subsidiary TCs may coincide, and higher-level TCs cover lower-level TCs. The reason that this research adopts the concept of topic chains is that although topic chains are considered as “without clear and precise definition in nature” (Wen 2006: 44), and topic chain transitions are not easily recognizable in naturally-occurring data, it is suitable for sitcom because (a) sitcoms are scripted, and there are always characters interacting in a given situation (i.e. context). and (b) topic changes are usually indicated by boundary markers, a direct change of topic, a character shows up and change the situation, or a change of place. The structure of sitcom makes conversational topic chains applicable.

In terms of categorizing the data, one thing must be mentioned that all the

categories are not mutually exclusive. In some cases, social underachiever and intellectual overachiever can be simultaneously represented. Also qualities under one top-level category can be simultaneously represented as well. For example, the characters may be talking about comic book characters, but they end up with an unexpected conclusion (where punchline occurs) that is a taboo topic. Such cases are counted twice. The analysis will be qualitative, that is, the author will provide explanations as to why these examples contribute to the stereotype of nerds and humor in this sitcom.

This chapter will be divided into six major sections: (1) nerds as social underachievers; (2) nerds as intellectual overachievers; (3) nerds as sci-fi and comic book fans; (4) ethnic stereotypes and (5) mismatch of styles. The first five sections are the categorization of the data. The sixth section discusses the reference point in representing nerds.

4.1 Nerds as social underachievers

What makes *The Big Bang Theory* so different from other sitcoms is that this is a sitcom dedicated to the representation and exploration of the stereotypes of a certain social group, namely nerds. They are extremely intelligent, yet they are socially tone-deaf. They are at ease in their own little world, but they are awkward and out of place when they interact with people outside of their group. Some of the punchlines in

The Big Bang Theory are specifically indexical to nerds, and they are going to be shown in the sections to come. To begin with, nerds are both social underachievers and intellectual overachievers. Punchlines index to these two qualities are considered a representation of nerds in this sitcom. Bucholtz (2001) proposes that nerds are usually considered as socially underachieved. This section are further divided into three sub-sections: (1) linguistic performance, which discusses how nerds deviate from the linguistic performance from non-nerds; (2) sociolinguistic incompetence, which discusses what aspect of sociolinguistic competence that nerds are portrayed to be in want, and finally (3) failure to adapt to social norms, which discusses how nerds are represented as anxious and awkward in various social situations in this sitcom.

4.1.1 Linguistic performance

The most significant deviations of the linguistic performance of nerds from non-nerds are that nerds are considered as lacking knowledge of politeness theory and failing to perceive implicature and irony. The following sub-sections discuss such inabilities of nerds in this sitcom.

4.1.1.1 Violation of politeness theory

Violation of pragmatic principles is a common source of humor in sitcom. In *The Big Bang Theory*, nerds are represented as people who have trouble perceiving and observing the mechanism of politeness. Some examples are shown in the following

sections, including cases of misusing and misunderstanding positive politeness and negative politeness.

Positive politeness

Howard, different from the three other nerds, is always motivated to impress the ladies because he sees himself as a “ladies’ man,” and he usually puts his thoughts in fashioning his utterance:

Example 1 (from 102)

They meet at the corridor.

←sub-TC 5→

Penny: Hey Raj! (*Raj looks uncomfortable*) **(laughter)** Still not talking to me, huh?

Sheldon: Don’t take it personally, it’s his pathology, he can’t talk to women.

=> Howard: He can’t talk to attractive women, or in your case a cheesecake-scented goddess! **(laughter)**

One of the humor sources of this sitcom is that Howard tries very hard to impress women with his fancy language; however, his strategy usually fails. Knowing that Penny works as a waitress at the Cheesecake Factory, Howard always compliments on Penny’s beauty and personality from the first time they meet, which bothers Penny very much. In the second episode, at a time when they are not very familiar with each other, the social distance between Penny and Howard is by no means close. Nevertheless, Howard’s strategy is to employ positive politeness every time he meets Penny in order to intensify her interest. Notice that he calls Penny a cheesecake-scented goddess, which suggests that Penny is as extraordinary as a

goddess, and that she smells as good as a cheesecake. This is a pun in relation to where Penny works, but it is somewhat implying that she is a cheesecake (after all, only cheesecakes smell like cheesecake), and that Howard has the intention to (metaphorically) consume her. Hines (1999) points out that WOMEN AS DESSERT has been appearing in the media since the 1990s, and it has become a common metaphor for American audience. It begins as a compliment on young and refreshing females, who are lovely and invigorating as desserts, but it also has been criticized as showing an attitude of objectifying women. Penny, as well as the audience, can detect the two-fold implication of Howard's words. The laughter of the audience is evoked because they know Howard wants to make good impressions, but it seems that he forgets the other possible interpretation.

When we want to tell a joke to improve the positive politeness with others, we have to make sure that other interlocutors understand the joke and that the joke does not offend them. If either of these two criteria is not met, the intention to improve the positive politeness may fail. Consider the following example:

Example 2 (from 111)

At Leonard and Sheldon's apartment.

←TC 2→

Penny: (*knocking and entering*) Hi guys.

Leonard: Hey!=

Penny: =Get my mail?

Leonard: Yeah, right here. How was Nebraska?

=> Penny: Oh, better than North Dakota! **(laughter)** (long pause, as Leonard looks confused, and Sheldon is staring at her) **(laughter)** Guess that joke's only funny in Nebraska. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: From the data at hand you really can't draw that conclusion. All you can say with absolute certainty is that that joke is not funny here. **(laughter)**

Penny went back to her hometown in Nebraska to visit her family, and Leonard starts a new topic by inquiring her how the trip was. She makes fun of the state of North Dakota instead of answering yes or no. Both Leonard and Sheldon take her response literally and feel confused, because there must be some criteria that makes Penny to conclude that Nebraska is better than North Dakota, yet Penny does not explicate. What they do not perceive is that Penny is telling a joke. The audience know this very well, since there is a laughter right after Penny says, "Oh, better than North Dakota." A second wave of laughter ensues when the audience sees that Leonard and Sheldon do not get the joke, since the incongruity between the question ("How was Nebraska") and the answer ("Oh, better than North Dakota") is obvious, but they fail to perceive that. Penny concludes that the joke is only funny in Nebraska because she ascribes the failure of the appreciation of this joke to the location factor, but Sheldon's answer shows that they do not think it is a joke, and Sheldon analyzes what Penny says from logical viewpoints, further distancing himself with Penny.

Jokes are not meant to be analyzed with logics. One of the functions of jokes is to alleviate tensions and psychological distance among interlocutors. It is also a

strategy of positive politeness for the speaker if he or she wants to take an initiative to build relationship and friendly atmosphere with the addressees. However, failure to perceive jokes means that this strategy fails.

If the speaker refuses to provide the other one with camaraderie, solidarity, and friendliness sentiments, he or she fails to consider the positive face of the addressee. In the example below, Sheldon, as the addressee of this conversational topic chain, does not perform such positive politeness to Leonard:

Example 3 (from 117)

At the university cafeteria.

←TC 21→

Leonard: Sheldon, I think I've made a mistake.

Sheldon: I can see that. Unless you're planning on running a marathon, choosing both stuffing and mashed potatoes is a starch-filled redundancy.

(laughter)

←sub-TC 21→

Leonard: No, it's about Penny.

Sheldon: A mistake involving Penny? (pause) Okay, you'll have to narrow it down. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: I don't think I can go out with her tonight.

=> Sheldon: Then don't. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: Other people would say "why not?" **(laughter)**

=> Sheldon: Other people might be interested. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: I'm gonna talk anyway.

=> Sheldon: I assumed you would. **(laughter)**

Leonard encounters some relationship problems with Penny. He asked her out the night before, right after she had broken up with her boyfriend. And in this TC, Leonard is not sure if he has made the right decision. He tries to engage Sheldon into

the conversation, and when Leonard finally expresses his concerns, Sheldon shows his indifference to Leonard. Leonard does not give up and provides Sheldon with an answer that would show the camaraderie and care about Leonard's problem, but Sheldon replies that other people might be interested, implying that he is not interested. Sheldon's detached attitude shows that he does not consider the positive face of Leonard when he is soliciting for advice or emotional support. Audience laughs at the fact that Sheldon boldly rejects Leonard's friendly gestures. This TC helps to stereotype nerds as people who do not usually apply politeness principles in conversation.

Negative politeness

The folk definition of politeness usually refers to negative politeness. It is a kind of politeness we employ linguistically to be indirect, humble, and minimize imposition. However, the unemployment of negative politeness in certain contexts causes incongruity, and hence the humor. In the following example, Sheldon clearly does not adhere to negative politeness when he should do so.

Example 4 (from 313)

Sheldon and Leonard's apartment was looted. They are reporting their loss to a policeman who comes to investigate. The policeman is holding a pen and a notepad to jot down their loss.

←TC 7→

Sheldon: They took our TV, two laptops, four external hard-drives, (speaks very fast) our PS2, our PS3, our X-Box, our X-Box 360, (**laughter**) our

classic Nintendo, our Super Nintendo, our Nintendo 64 **(laughter)** and our Wii.

Leonard: We like games. **(laughter)**

=> Sheldon: Right, games. (speaks very fast) They took Halo 1, Halo 2, Halo 3, **(laughter)** Call of Duty 1, Call of Duty 2, Call of Duty 3, Rock Band, Rock Band 2, Final Fantasy 1 through 9, The Legend of Zelda, The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess, Super Mario Brothers, Super Mario Galaxy, Mario and Sonic at the Winter Olympics **(laughter)** (pause) and Ms. Pacman. **(laughter)**

Policeman: (stares at Sheldon and writes) Assorted video games. **(laughter)**

Speakers perform negative politeness so that they do not impose their opinions and will on their interlocutors, or that they do not cause communication difficulties between the interlocutors. Since Leonard and Sheldon are the victims of a burglary, they are obliged to report their loss to the police, and the police officer should take notes. Nevertheless, Sheldon's description seems to be too detailed, which is unnecessary, and the fact that he speaks very fast causes inconvenience for the officer. The laughter is triggered because Sheldon defies the negative politeness, and the policeman's conclusion provides Sheldon with what he should say in such situation, and this triggers another burst of laughter. Also, the familiarity of the name of video games shows their nerdiness as well, since stereotypical nerds tend to engage in computer-related leisure activities.

In another example, one can see that Sheldon speaks too directly and fails to adhere to negative politeness:

Example 5 (from 318)

Sheldon refused a science award that he had been longing for years simply because he has serious stage fright. He just came back to his apartment. Leonard, Penny, Howard, and Raj are sitting on the sofa and waiting for his return.

←TC 13→

Sheldon: (enters) Hello. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Sit down, we wanna talk to you.

Sheldon: Am I in trouble? Did my mother call you? **(laughter)**

Penny: Just sit.

(Sheldon sits down)

Leonard: We think we can help you with your stage fright.

=> Sheldon: Oh:::, I doubt that. I haven't figure out a way and I'm much smarter than all of you. **(laughter)**

Penny: Yes, but you're not smarter than all of us put together.

=> Sheldon: Oh, I'm sorry. That is what I meant. **(laughter)**

When his friends all offer to help Sheldon with his stage fright, he directly refuses it and states that he is much smarter than all of them. This statement is rude and pompous because Sheldon fails to consider the negative face of the addressees. When we boast ourselves, we are imposing our own opinions to the addressee. Perhaps the addressee would agree to our boasting, but nevertheless a face-threatening act is done. Even though the addressees are Sheldon's friends, and they may not be angry with him, he imposes a somewhat degrading opinion on them, without knowing that this makes the addressees uncomfortable. The audience laughs because one knows that this is the kind of thing that Sheldon may do, and at the same time, strengthens the stereotype of nerd.

4.1.1.2 Unable to perceive conversational implicature and irony

An implicature is the meaning that is conveyed without being entailed or clearly stated, a term coined by Grice (1975). In conversations, understanding the interlocutor's implicature makes communication smooth. However, in the following example, Sheldon is represented as someone who has difficulties understanding implicature, causing communication breakdowns from time to time:

Example 6 (from 322)

Seven years ago. Leonard just moved in. He and an Asian woman are lying on the bed, kissing passionately in his room. Sheldon wants to talk to him.

←TC 11→

[six lines omitted]

Sheldon: (knocking) Leonard. (knocking) Leonard. (knocking) Leonard.

(laughter)

Leonard: (stops kissing her abruptly and shouts) What do you want?

(Sheldon suddenly opens the door)=

Leonard: =(both he and the woman are shocked) I didn't say come in!

=> Sheldon: You asked what I wanted. **(laughter)** I wanted to come in. **(laughter)**

It is obvious that Leonard calls for some privacy in such situation, but Sheldon's constant knocking on the door bothers him. He thus shouts "What do you want?" instantly. This utterance carries an implicature of impatience and unfriendliness because there are other utterances that show politeness and sympathy (i.e. "Is everything OK?"), or that are neutral (i.e. "Who is it?") but Leonard does not opt to say them to Sheldon. Also, Leonard is shouting when speaking this utterance to Sheldon, confirming that the implicature of Leonard's utterance is that "I feel

bothered” or “This is not a good time that you come to me”. However, Sheldon does not catch the implicature of Sheldon’s utterance, and opens the door. Leonard and his date are shocked, and Leonard protests, “I didn’t say come in!” He explicitly speaks out the part that is not entailed by his last utterance (i.e. the implicature), but Sheldon takes the utterance “What do you want?” literally without considering its implicature; thus he says “You asked what I wanted. I wanted to come in”. The audience noticed that Sheldon fails to understand the implicature but only the literal meaning, and thus evokes their laughter.

Verbal irony can be considered as one kind of implicature, since the actual meaning conveyed is usually the complete opposite of the literal meaning. In the series, nerds are portrayed as people who have difficulties understanding verbal irony. This attribute is especially represented in Sheldon’s personality. Although verbal irony is a kind of violation of linguistic norms, unable to understand verbal irony is represented as the nerds’ trait, as non-nerds in the series are not seen as having these problems. Consider the example:

Example 7 (from 316)

Sheldon and Penny got the home address of Stan Lee, a famous comic book writer. They go to his house uninvited.

←TC 31→

=> Stan Lee: (angrily) You know, you fan boys are unbelievable. Do you think you can just ring my doorbell any time you want? I mean, why don’t you just come on in and watch the Lakers game with me?

=> Sheldon: Well, I'm not much of a sports fan, but thank you (goes into Stan Lee's house). **(laughter)**

Verbal irony is a rhetorical technique that should be understood beyond the literal meaning. However, Sheldon fails to put the utterance of Stan Lee in the context of his indignation. It is illogical that someone who is bothered by fans would invite these fans to "come on in and watch the Lakers game" with him. Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) would suggest that it should be a case of verbal irony, since the literal meaning of the sentence (i.e. invitation) does not fit into the context; thus, it is not the most accessible interpretation. Nevertheless, Sheldon perceives the literal meaning of this utterance and interprets it as an invitation. This triggers audience's laughter because it is incongruous with the normal situation. This example suggests that nerdy people have difficulty perceiving verbal irony or any other rhetorical techniques.

4.1.2 Sociolinguistic incompetence

Nerds are portrayed as people who lack sociolinguistic competence in this sitcom. They are unable to perceive context of setting and scene, and they have no idea which topics are taboo topics. Even though they often discuss taboo topics from a scientific point of view, it does not change the fact that discussing topics such as sex, excrement, disease and death in informal conversations are still a taboo.

4.1.2.1 Unable to perceive context of setting and scene

Hymes (1974) proposes an ethnographic framework, known as the acronym SPEAKING, to explain the various factors that are involved in linguistic interaction. The first division, S, is the initial of setting and scene. Setting refers to “the time and place of a speech act and, in general, to the physical circumstances”, while scene refers to psychological setting" or "cultural definition" of a scene, including characteristics such as range of formality and sense of play or seriousness. The humor of nerdy characters also comes from the failure of perceiving the context of setting and scene. Consider the following example:

Example 8 (from 313)

After the apartment burglary, Sheldon is too afraid to sleep alone, since Leonard and Penny are a couple and often spend the night together. He comes to Penny's and asks for her permission to sleep over.

←TC 16→

Penny: Sheldon, do you want to sleep here tonight?

=> Sheldon: Oh, as small as Leonard is, I don't think the two of you'd be comfortable on the couch. **(laughter)**

Penny offers Leonard and Sheldon to stay for a night in her apartment after the guy's apartment was burgled, but there is only one room with a double bed. The third person must sleep on the couch. Given that Leonard and Penny are dating, it is safe to assume that Sheldon, being single, sleeps on the couch while Leonard and Penny sleep together on Penny's double bed. Nevertheless, Sheldon failed to perceive this implicature provided by the setting and the scene. Penny does not explicate this

context because it is obvious for her (and the audience) that Sheldon sleeping on the couch is the only appropriate arrangement. Yet Sheldon's response explicates that it is inappropriate for Leonard and Penny to sleep on the couch together because that would be uncomfortable. This assertion implies that Sheldon himself would sleep on Penny's double bed. The laughter is evoked because Sheldon lacks the awareness of the scene and setting.

Another example shows that unawareness of context may lead to misunderstanding. Consider the following example, where Sheldon neglects the context and the implicature of his own requests:

Example 9 (from 203)

At the university cafeteria. The four men and Leslie Winkle discuss on the issue of Penny's recent severe addiction to online games. They conclude that the best distraction for Penny is sex, while Leonard disagrees.

=> Sheldon: ←TC 29→ (Leans over to a good looking man on a nearby table.)

Excuse me, are you currently involved in a sexual relationship?

(laughter)

Man: No.

=> Sheldon: Would you like to be? **(laughter)**

Man: Uh, sure, why not? **(laughter)**

Leonard: Sheldon=

=> Sheldon: =(fast, high pitch) Zip it pip it. **(laughter)** Can I have your phone number?

(laughter)

Man: Uh... (checks out Sheldon) Yeah, yeah. (Pulls out a pen and writes his phone number on Sheldon's hand.) **(laughter)**

Sheldon: (turns back) There, problem solved. **(laughter)**

Leslie: Dumbass. **(laughter)**

In this scene, the four men and Leslie Winkle, their colleague in the university,

discuss on the issue and the reason of Penny's online game addiction. Leslie proposes that Penny's addiction to online games is rooted from her frustration of her sex life. Four of them agree with this statement, while Leonard thinks that it is "insane." Sheldon, however, accepts this idea completely and proceed to immediate action. His idea is that if Penny has sexual intercourse with a man, her problem will be solved. Therefore, Sheldon asks a random man at a nearby table, and asks the following question boldly (at the same time violates the negative politeness that one keeps with a total stranger): "Are you currently involved in a sexual relationship?" This triggers laughter because not only it violates politeness principle, but it also (mistakenly) implies that the one seeking for sexual intercourse is Sheldon, which is an incongruity from the truth. The reason for laughter here is that Sheldon, who is asking another man on topics of sexual relationship, can be easily taken as a gay man. After the man answers a direct "no," Sheldon continues with "would you like to be?" This is a genuine question for Sheldon, who, at most of the time, cares about only the literal meaning of words and sentences. However, the man receives the implicature of the sentence: "would you like to be in one with me?" The audience also catches the implicature, hence the laughter. The man responds with "sure, why not?" This is unusual because in unmarked conditions, we presume that one is heterosexual, and is sure to decline an offer of a sexual encounter with the same sex. This answer seems to

imply that the man may be gay or bisexual, and this “surprise” triggers laughter. Leonard tries to stop Sheldon, but he interrupts, and another laughter follows because Sheldon misses the chance of escaping this misunderstanding, and proceeds with the question “can I have your phone number?” This is yet another question that violates negative politeness; also, the misunderstanding is even deeper, thus laughter ensues. The man hesitates first, but he checks out Sheldon for a few seconds, and then agrees to do so. This whole episode reminds the audience of the script of courtship. What is humorous is that Sheldon does not realize that what he says causes misunderstanding. He simply wants to solve Penny’s problem, but the man thinks that Sheldon is looking for a sexual encounter. This is a violation of the P (i.e. Participants) and E (i.e. Ends) of Hyme’s (1974) SPEAKING acronym. Sheldon should not talk about taboo topics with a stranger; also, Sheldon and the man have different ends toward this conversation, that is, Sheldon is looking for a sexual encounter for Penny, while the man misunderstands that Sheldon is looking for a sexual encounter for himself. However, this mismatch of assumption is never explicated.

4.1.2.2 Unable to perceive taboo topics

Taboos are social-specific events that members of a given society prohibit or elude to discuss because they are seen as sacred or bothersome. In *The Big Bang Theory*, nerds are often portrayed as unaware of social taboos. Social taboos include

sex, excrement, disease, and death. The first example shows that Sheldon fails to perceive sex as a taboo topic:

Example 10 (from 302)

At Leonard and Sheldon's apartment. The four guys and Penny are eating dinner.

←sub-sub-TC 5→

Penny: What are they talking about?

Leonard: I don't know

Sheldon: I know. As I'm sure you're [aware

Leonard: [(high pitch) Duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh.

=> Sheldon: If that's Morse code, that's terrible. **(laughter)** As I was saying, you and Leonard had a disappointing sexual encounter. Earlier this evening, Leonard characterized it as just fine. So what you're seeing here is a continuation of the mocking that followed. **(laughter)**

Penny: Okay, yeah, well, (stands up) I'm just gonna go eat my dinner elsewhere. Maybe an airplane headed for a mountainside. (leaves)

Leonard: Penny, wait. Aagh! (to Sheldon, angrily) What is wrong with you? (goes back to his room)

=> Sheldon: (long pause) I sense I may have crossed some sort of line. **(laughter)**

Raj: Yeah, you=

Howard: =Uh, no, no, no, don't tell him, let's see if he can figure it out.

(laughter)

(Sheldon ponders) **(laughter)**

Leonard and Penny officially became a couple in the last episode (301), and Leonard casually gives away the detail of the sex encounter between him and Penny to the three other guys. When they are eating dinner together, Howard and Raj are whispering about this event, and Penny is curious about what they are discussing in private. However, Sheldon is unaware that it is generally a social taboo to openly about people's sex life in their face, and he tells Penny everything he knows. Penny

shamefully leaves the room while Leonard goes back to his room angrily. The reason why Sheldon tells everything is because Penny asks him “What are they talking about?” And he answers what he knows, regardless of the taboo content. After Leonard and Penny leave the living room, Sheldon wonders if he has done something wrong to anger them. Sheldon’s ignorance of not discussing taboo topics and that he only acknowledges literal meanings are the source of humor. Raj tries to reveal this truth, but Howard stops him and suggests that they wait and see. As Sheldon’s friend, they should be truthful to him in appropriate contexts, but they choose not to, which evokes laughter.

Aside from sex, diseases are another kind of taboo in Western society:

Example 11 (from 202)

←TC 9→

Sheldon: (enters with an opened box) Great news. My mom sent me my old Nintendo 64.

Leonard: Terrific.

Sheldon: You know what this means, don’t you? Break out the Red Bull, it’s time to rock Mario old school. **(laughter)**

Leonard: I kind of have other plans tonight.

=> Sheldon: But it’s Friday. Friday is always vintage game night. (searching in the box) Look, mom included the memory card. We can pick up where I left off in 1999 when I had pernicious anemia. **(laughter)**

Sheldon is delighted when he receives the package from his mother. In the package contains the vintage video games he loves since he was young. However, Leonard does not share his enthusiasm and points out that he has other plans tonight.

Sheldon does not receive this message and continues that he can relieve his memories from the time he had pernicious anemia. This triggers laughter because usually one does not explicate what kind of disease they have contracted to others. We usually talk about personal medical history when we are in urgent situations, or when we go to the doctors. In light conversations, when friends chat with each other, it would be peculiar to talk about diseases. The incongruity triggers the laughter of the audience.

One character worth discussing is Leonard's mother, Dr. Beverly Hofstadter. She is a successful neuroscientist and psychiatrist, yet she is emotionally detached from everyone around her. Although she is an accomplished scholar, she is practically socially tone-deaf. Naturally, she bonds with Sheldon quickly, while she has tense relationship with her son. She only appears twice in the first three seasons, yet her presence makes Leonard very uncomfortable. Consider the following example:

Example 12 (from 215)

←TC 11→

Leonard: So, mother, what's new?

=> Beverly: You'll have to be more specific. **(laughter)**

Leonard: All right, what's new with you?

=> Beverly: Oh, well, I've been having some fascinating menopausal symptoms recently. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Maybe something less personal. **(laughter)**

←TC 12→

=> Beverly: Oh. Your uncle Floyd died.

Leonard: Oh my God, what happened?

=> Beverly: His heart stopped beating. **(laughter)** ←TC 13→ (She stands up) I have to urinate. (She walks toward the bathroom) **(laughter)**

From the beginning, Leonard tries to make small talks with a simple conversation opener, “What’s new?” However, his mother responds “You’ll have to be more specific,” from which we can see that she is not aware that “What’s new” functions as a conversation opener, and she regards it as a genuine question. With Leonard being more specific, she tells that she is in the process of menopause, which is a taboo topic for conversation, especially with your son. One can see that Beverly answers question based solely on sentential semantics without any pragmatic/sociolinguistic considerations. This lack of knowledge of interaction evokes laughter from the audience. After Leonard learns that his mother is going through menopause, he softens the question. Beverly brings up the death of Uncle Floyd, which is not as personal as menopause, and at the same time, a semantically valid response to Leonard’s request. What Beverly fails to notice again is that death is another taboo topic, and it sometimes could be shocking to the addressee. This leads to Leonard’s shocking response, asking for the cause of Uncle Floyd’s death. This time, Beverly still solely considers the semantics, and she provides the answer, “his heart stopped beating.” Obviously, this does not reveal the cause of his death, as Leonard’s question “what happened?” solicits for it. What follows this null response is a new TC, which means that she does not want to elaborate on Uncle Floyd’s death. After that, she directly points out to the four guys that she has to urinate, another

taboo topic involving excrement. In addition, it is an unrelated topic in regard of Uncle Floyd's death. The way that Beverly converses with people is incongruent from the norm, hence the laughter from the audience.

4.1.3 Failure to adapt to social norms

Nerds are represented as highly anxious and awkward in ritualized, routine and mundane social interactions. Their inflexibility during interactions and their lack of popular culture knowledge hinder their adaptation to social norms.

4.1.3.1 Social anxiety and awkwardness

Nerds are usually considered as incapable of observing social rituals. Linguistically, they fail to adhere to formulaic patterns of language in particular social settings. In the following example, Leonard and Sheldon discover that they have a new next-door neighbor, Penny. The three of them run into each other at the apartment corridor.

Example 13 (from 101)

At the apartment corridor.

←TC 5→

Penny: (smiles, high pitch) Oh, hi!

Leonard: Hi.

Sheldon: Hi.

=> Leonard: Hi.

Sheldon: Hi. (**laughter**)

Penny: (pause) Hi? (**laughter**)

From this example, we can see that the first three lines are an adjacency

sequence of greeting, but the fourth and fifth line, in which Leonard and Sheldon says “hi” again respectively, is redundant and awkward. Leonard should not initiate another “hi”, but Sheldon does not see what goes wrong, hence the laughter in the fifth line. Penny’s pause and second “hi” with a rising intonation shows that she is confounded by such unnecessary double-greeting. This exchange suggests that Leonard and Sheldon have problems with greeting with a stranger, for they fail to observe the adjacency pair of greeting.

As for Howard and Raj, their introduction to Penny also does not follow the traditional adjacency pair of greetings. Example 2 is the first encounter between Penny and Raj.

Example 14 (from 101)

Penny has dinner with the four guys at Leonard and Sheldon’s apartment.

←TC 24→

Penny (*to Raj*): So, you guys work with Leonard and Sheldon at the University?
=> (*Raj looks at her, looks back at his food, takes a mouthful*) (**laughter**)

Penny tries to begin a conversation with Raj, so she first confirms the relationship between Raj and Howard and Sheldon and Leonard. However, the adjacency pair of question/answer is not realized when Raj does not say anything in response to Penny’s yes/no question. In other words, there is no minimal response for a yes/no question from Raj. In real-world communication, a back-channeling “uh-huh” is sufficient to serve as a response to a yes/no question. In addition to not

answering the question, Raj proceeds to eat his food, and this deviation from normalcy, or incongruity, triggers laughter. Later, Howard explains that Raj suffers from extreme social anxiety and thus cannot talk to women. But before the audience knows the real reason behind this communication failure, audience considers that it is inappropriate to leave a greeting adjacency pair unfinished.

Sheldon, Leonard and Raj do not have adequate greetings with Penny, suggesting that nerds do not know how to greet and meet new people properly, thus representing them as social underachiever.

In some other scenarios, nerds are represented as people who adhere to conversational formula without any flexibility, due to the anxiety that rooted from spontaneity and uncertainty in human interactions:

Example 15 (from 221)

Penny's apartment. Sheldon is locked outside of his apartment, so he and Penny eat dinner together.

←TC 31→

=> Sheldon: So, how was your day?

Penny: Are you trying to make small talk? Oh, sweetie, you really don't have to.

=> Sheldon: No, it's the accepted convention. **(laughter)** How was your day?

Penny: Well, uh, they shifted my schedule around at the restaurant so my hours are going to be a little different=

=> Sheldon: =I'm sorry, that's not going to interest me at all, just eat. **(laughter)**

Sheldon starts this TC by asking "So, how was your day?" to Penny, which is a typical conversation opener, but a rarity coming from Sheldon. Penny is surprised by

his act, and she tells him that it is not obligatory to make small talks if he does not want to, but Sheldon insisted that it is “the accepted convention” and repeats the conversation opener again. From here, we can see that nerds are stereotyped as people who follow social conventions without exception when interacting with people because they are not as flexible as others. They need a law to proceed accordingly, without the consideration of interlocutor’s volition. The audience is amused when Sheldon insists on carrying on the conversation because he talks because he has to, not that he wants to. After Sheldon’s repetition of the conversation opener, she talks about her work in the Cheesecake Factory as a waitress, but before she finishes talking, Sheldon interrupts and expresses his nonchalance about her mundane life. The audience laughs because for average people, if one does not want to talk, he/she will not start a conversation, and there will not be any punishment if one does not want to talk, but Sheldon insists on maintaining social conventions without and flexibility causes incongruity and triggers laughter.

Aside from being uncomfortable during interactions, nerds are sometimes pathologically anxious, such as the selective mutism from which Raj suffers:

Example 16 (from 115)

At a hallway in the university. Leonard notices a flyer posted on the bulletin board.

←TC 2→

Leonard: Hey, check it out, the school of pharmacology is looking for volunteers.

=> Raj: (reads the flyer) We are testing a new medication for social anxiety, panic attacks, agoraphobia and obsessive compulsive disorder. **(laughter)** Why would they be looking for test subjects here? **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: I don't know, Raj. Maybe the comic book store doesn't have a bulletin board. **(laughter)**

Leonard and Raj notice a flyer calling for test subjects for a new kind of medicine intended for several socio-psychological disorders. The humor lies in the place where they post the flyer: in the physics department. This implies that it is more likely to find people with socio-psychological disorders in the physics department. However, this implication is a stereotype of nerds. They are not necessarily more likely to have such problems, but they are constantly portrayed as people lacking social skills and eventually with different levels of social anxiety and socio-psychological disorders. The script writers poke fun at this stereotype about nerds when Leonard implies that the comic book store would be their first option to post this flyer, suggesting that people who frequent the comic book store are more likely to fulfill the requirement of the volunteers of this new medicine; in other words, they are more nerdy than people in the physics department. This excerpt shows that stereotypically, nerds can be found in physics department and comic book store, and are often troubled with socio-psychological problems. One thing worth noted that later in the episode, Raj goes to the bulletin board and tears down one piece of the fliers.

4.1.3.2 Lack of popular culture knowledge

In this sitcom, nerds are characterized as people who are ignorant about general popular culture except the sci-fi genre. After the departmental physics ball, Penny decides to test Leonard and Sheldon on the basic knowledge on general American popular culture:

Example 17 (from 113)

←TC 35→

Penny (*entering*): Okay, new contest.

Leonard: What are you doing?

Penny: I'm settling once and for all who is the smartest around here. Okay, are you ready?

Sheldon: Absolutely.

Leonard: Bring it on.

←TC 36→

Penny: Okay. Marsha, Jan and Cindy were the three daughters of what TV family?

(They stare at her.) **(laughter)** *The Brady Bunch*. Okay, **(laughter)** ←TC 37→

Sammy Hagar replaced David Lee Roth as the lead singer in what group?

(Leonard and Sheldon look at each other in confusion) **(laughter)**

Sheldon: The Brady Bunch? **(laughter)**

Penny: Van Halen. ←TC 38→ Alright, Madonna was married to this Ridgmont High alum. (pause) **(laughter)** Oh my God, Sean Penn!

Leonard: How do you know these things? **(laughter)**

Penny: I go outside and I talk to people. **(laughter)** ←TC 39→ Alright, here, what actor holds the record for being named people magazine's sexiest man alive?

Sheldon: William Shatner. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Wait, I don't think it's Shatner.

Sheldon: Then it's got to be Patrick Stewart. **(laughter)**

Penny: No.

Sheldon: Formal protest. **(laughter)**

←TC 40→

Penny: Alright, singer who sang "Oops I Did It Again." (Sheldon starts involuntarily twitching again.) **(laughter)** Okay, Tweety Bird, taught he taw a what?

Sheldon: (after they pass a smug look between each other) Romulan. **(laughter)**

Penny: Yes. He taught he taw a Romulan. **(laughter)**
(Sheldon and Leonard do a victory hand slide.) **(laughter)**

The questions posed by Penny are fairly easy for Americans who are familiar with mainstream popular culture. However, it seems that Leonard and Sheldon know nothing about *The Brady Bunch* (a popular American television sitcom in the 1970s), Van Halen (an American hard rock band who shot to the fame since late 1970s), Madonna and Sean Penn's much-publicized and tumultuous romance and marriage in the 1980s, Britney Spears (pop idol in the 2000s), and Tweety (a canary in Looney Tunes cartoon franchise), and judging from the answers they give, they are only familiar with the segment of sci-fi in the pop culture: William Shatner, Patrick Stewart, and Romulan. William Shatner is the actor who portrays James T. Kirk (one of the main characters) in the *Star Trek* enterprise since the 1960s, and he focuses entertainment career in the sci-fi genre, with other ventures in sitcoms and television drama. Shanter is regarded as a cultural icon in sci-fi fandom, but he is not considered as "sexy" in any way during his long and successful career. Patrick Stewart is originally a Shakespearean actor, and joins the *Star Trek* franchise in the 1980s to play Jean-Luc Picard, also one of the main characters. It is not surprising that Leonard and Sheldon are only familiar with actors within *Star Trek* universe, since sci-fi genre is usually the only pop culture segment that nerds are interested in.

Finally, Tweety is a canary, thus it does not speak as humans do. The reason why

they think it is Romulan is because that is a (constructed) language spoken by Romulans, a fictional race of alien humanoids in the *Star Trek* franchise. Leonard and Sheldon think that they are listening to a language that is similar to alien's language, thus they make this conclusion without knowing that Tweety only talks in onomatopoeia, since it is a canary. Penny cannot believe they do not get any correct answer, and ironically says they are correct, but Leonard and Sheldon fail to perceive that this is an irony, which indicates that nerds are not familiar with general popular culture, nor are they able to process irony.

Nerds, who are into sci-fi, are not necessarily social underachievers, but in this example, one can see that Leonard and Sheldon are fairly ignorant of what is considered common knowledge in mainstream society.

Example 18 (from 113)

←TC 11→

Scene: Sheldon is on his laptop. Leonard enters.

Sheldon: Leonard, excellent, I want to show you something.

Leonard: Can it wait, I need to talk to you.

Sheldon: Just look. I've designed the perfect uniforms for our team. The colors are based on Star Trek, the original series. The three of you will wear support red, and I will wear command gold. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: Why do they say AA?

=> Sheldon: Army Ants. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: Isn't that confusing? AA might mean something else to certain people.

=> Sheldon: Why would a physics bowl team be called anodized aluminum?
(laughter)

Leonard: No, I meant (pause) never mind.

The departmental physics bowl is just around the corner, and the four guys decide to enter this competition. Sheldon is enthusiastic and is managing everything, including the team T-shirt and the name of the team. He decides that the team name is AA, which stands for Army Ants. However, in the U.S., AA is widely known as *Alcoholics Anonymous*, a fellowship support group destined to treat people with alcoholism without hurting their self-esteem by staying anonymous. This is a taboo and is not good for a team name because alcoholism is a kind of addictive disorder. The humor lies in that Sheldon is completely unaware of this coincidence, not even after Leonard's reminder, and claims that AA could also stand for anodized aluminum. At this point, Leonard gives up.

Later in the episode, Sheldon has a fight with the three other guys, and leaves the team. They have to recruit another teammate because there must be four members in each team in the physics bowl. Leslie Winkle, one of their colleagues, is called for help. Sheldon hires three other people (i.e. a departmental janitor, a cooking lady and a man who is either her son or her butcher) who know nothing about physics to form the new AA, while Leonard reveals the new team name on the spot.

Example 19 (from 113)

←TC 19→

Dr. Gablehouser: Okay, if everyone could please take your seats.
(Leslie and Sheldon stares at each other)

=> Leonard: Here's your T-shirt. (Hands her a T-shirt with PMS on it. Takes jacket b
off to reveal a similar one.) **(laughter)**

=> Leslie: PMS? It's a couple of days early. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: No, it stands for Perpetual Motion Squad.

=> Leslie: Oh, right, of course, what was I thinking? **(laughter)**

The new team name is revealed as PMS. Although Leonard says that it stands for Perpetual Motion Squad, the most relevant understanding to it is “premenstrual syndrome,” a kind of physical/psychological/emotional discomfort that some women suffer from before menstrual cycles. It is also a kind of taboo (i.e. qualifies as a kind of disease) and is not suitable for a team name. However, Leonard fails to perceive the irony in Leslie's response, “Oh, right, of course, what was I thinking?” From these two segments, the humor lies in that Leonard and Sheldon are both unaware the taboo that lies in initialism. The humor adds up when the physics bowl becomes a direct challenge between AA and PMS.

4.1.3.3 Eccentricity

Among the four nerds, the character of Sheldon stretches the stereotype of inflexibility to the fullest. For non-nerds, the humor lies in that he tends to react exaggeratedly to the situation.

Example 20 (from 219)

=> Sheldon: Penny, please, we're facing a far more serious problem than stray arachnids.

Leonard: Sheldon, it's not that bad.

=> Sheldon: Not bad? It's horrible. I mean, you hear stories about this sort of thing,
but you never think it'll happen to you.

Leonard: So they steamed your dumplings, get over it. **(laughter)**

Sheldon is extremely picky about his diet. Throughout the series, he has strict, specific, and nuanced requests on take-out foods. Sheldon proposes that they have a big problem facing them. Leonard thinks otherwise, but Sheldon refuted him by stating that the problem is so horrible that you hear about them, but never thinks that it will happen to you. Finally, Leonard reveals what the serious problem is: the restaurant steamed Sheldon's dumplings. The audience expects a big problem because Sheldon precludes it as if the problem is too complicated to solve, or too much to handle. But if you ask the restaurant to not steam your dumplings, but they eventually did, you can still eat the dumplings, even if they are not prepared as you would like them. If you insist on not eating steamed dumplings, you can solve the problem by returning the dumplings and tell them to make new ones, or buy new dumplings that are not steamed. From every point of view, it is as easy as it can be to solve this problem. The audience laughs because Sheldon has blown this event out of proportions.

Example 21 (from 210)

At Leonard and Sheldon's apartment. Stephanie is checking Sheldon's throat with a tongue depressor.

←TC 16→

Stephanie: Oh, no.

Sheldon: (with a tongue depressor in his mouth) Wha:::? **(laughter)**

Stephanie: You were right. Your larynx is terribly inflamed. I mean, I've never seen anything like it. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: (with a tongue depressor in his mouth) I knew it! What do I do?

Stephanie: You're going to need to stop talking immediately. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: For how=

Stephanie: =Du-du-du-du! Immediately.

←TC 17→

Leonard: (enters) Hey.

Stephanie: Oh, hi, honey.

Leonard: Sheldon.

(Sheldon waves to Leonard, makes some gestures and runs into his room)

(laughter)

Leonard: What's going on?

=> Stephanie: I just performed a **Sheldonectomy**. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Careful, if you don't get it all, it'll only come back worse. **(laughter)**

Stephanie: Gotcha.

In this episode, Leonard is dating Stephanie, a doctor. Sheldon likes to hang out with Leonard and Stephanie, to the extent of being bothersome and intrusive for them. Sheldon likes to express his opinions on everything during the date between Leonard and Stephanie (where he should not have shown up in the first place), and he also asks her to perform physical checkups on him because he suspected that he is sick (without solid proof). Stephanie finally agrees to check up on Sheldon, and she lies about his larynx inflammation. The audience can tell this is a lie because Sheldon's voice has always been fine. Now that Sheldon learns that he has serious larynx inflammation, he stops talking altogether, and simultaneously solving their problem. Stephanie refers to this white lie as a "Sheldonectomy." The word is a blending between proper name

Sheldon and the suffix –ectomy, meaning “to surgically remove of.” Stephanie blends the two morphemes to describe the fact that she successfully removes one of the annoying habits: speak when he is not asked to do so. Leonard obviously understands the meaning of this new blending word, and reminds her that she should perform it completely. If Sheldon finds out that this is a trickery, he will become angry and will not stop nagging.

Example 22 (from 301)

←TC 8 (cont.)→

Howard: Sheldon, you remember the first few weeks we were looking for magnetic monopoles and not finding anything and you were acting like an obnoxious, giant dictator?

Raj: I thought we were going to be gentle with him.

=> Howard: That’s why I added the -tator. **(laughter)**

←sub-TC 8→ [omitted]

←sub-sub-TC 8→ [omitted]

←sub-TC 8 (cont.)→ [omitted]

←sub-sub-TC 8 (cont.)→

Sheldon: (angrily) You tampered with my experiment?

Howard: We had to.

=> Raj: It was the only way to keep you from being such a huge Dickensian.

(laughter) You see that? I added the -ensian. **(laughter)**

Howard and Raj are quite discontented with Sheldon when they spent three months at the North Pole doing research together. Howard accuses Sheldon of being “an obnoxious, giant dictator.” Raj comments that Howard is too harsh, and Howard responds him with “That’s why I added the –tator.” The audience laughs because there is no etymological relationship between the word “dictator” with Howard’s intended

comment on Sheldon, which is the slang usage of “dick,” meaning an abrasive, repugnant, and annoying man. The added element “-tator” is not an affix, thus it cannot be attached to another stem, making it a false analysis of words. The humor of the wordplay lies in the knowledge of the script writers and the audience of English morphology.

Raj tries to imitate Howard by commenting on Sheldon that he is “a huge Dickensian” and acknowledges that he adds the “-ensian.” But the laughter appears right after “Dickensian” because “a huge Dickensian” does not make sense at all. Since it is meaningless, it does not reach the affect of dictator/dick made by Howard. Also, Raj makes this comment after a sub-TC. To be more precise, he picks up where Howard left off, but the same punchline wears off the novelty and freshness.

4.2 Nerds as intellectual overachievers

Although nerds are constantly regarded as socially inept, they are, however, intellectually outstanding among the “ordinary” people. They are seen as people with high IQ and an overwhelming adoration toward science, information, technology and sci-fi themed entertainment. Accordingly, the four nerds in the sitcom are designed to show similar characteristics. In the following sections, some characteristics of nerds in terms of language are discussed, including the usage of “superstandard” language, demonstration of anecdotal knowledge, multilingualism, in-group humor, provision of

metalinguistic comments, and the demonstration of technology mastery.

4.2.1 Linguistic performance: Superstandard language

Nerds often employ the register of superstandard language to communicate. They are high in formality, which is useful in demonstrating their linguistic competence and prestige over non-nerds. They tend to use advanced vocabulary, formal register structures, and they pay extensive attention to subtle linguistic nuances.

According to Bucholtz (2001), the language variety spoken by nerds is termed “superstandard English”. It is a spoken variety very close to the written variety. This variety is not bound to certain region, rather, it can be considered as a kind of sociolect, as it may be the marker of nerds, a certain social group. There are a few characteristics of Superstandard English, with discussion in the following sections.

4.2.1.1 Advanced Vocabulary

To show they are intellectually superior, nerds tend to use advanced vocabulary rather than words of normal register:

Example 23 (from 102)

At Leonard and Sheldon’s apartment. Penny is furious because the two men went into Penny’s apartment with the spare key at night and cleaned up for her.

←sub-TC 17→

Penny: Do you understand how creepy this is?

Leonard: Oh, yes, we discussed it at length last night.

Penny: In my apartment, while I was sleeping?

=> Sheldon: And snoring. **(laughter)** And that's probably just a sinus infection, but it could be sleep apnoea, you might want to see an otolaryngologist.
(pause, as Penny stares at him) **(laughter)** It's a throat doctor.

Penny is infuriated that Leonard and Sheldon entered her apartment and cleaned up for her while she was sleeping, because it is clearly an intrusion. However, Sheldon fails to detect her anger and pointing out that she snores and should consider seeking professional help. He also uses advanced medical vocabulary such as “apnoea” and “otolaryngologist” without considering his addressee. Sheldon makes a repair after Penny stares at him, and solves the communication breakdown caused by advanced vocabulary. This excerpt represents Sheldon, being one of the nerds, tend to use advanced vocabulary to establish himself as intellectually superior; nevertheless, such behavior may cause obstacles of communication, and it triggers laughter. One can check the frequency of a given word to see if it is an advanced word. British National Corpus (BNC), which is a giant corpus containing 100 million words of contemporary English across formalities, serves as a useful tool to check if a word can be considered as a member of advanced vocabulary. If the number of tokens is low, it can be considered as a member of advanced vocabulary. There are only 15 tokens for “apnoea” and 1 token of the alternative spelling “apnea”; there are 0 tokens for “otolaryngologist” and 4 tokens for “otolaryngology,” the root of “otolaryngologist”. Consider that the corpus contains 100 million words, the usage frequency of these two

words is extremely low, and thus they can be considered as members of advanced vocabulary.

In another example, Sheldon uses an advanced vocabulary, the uncountable noun “ken”, to refer to “power”. Unlike the last example, Penny refuted.

Example 24 (from 207)

←TC 21→

Scene: The laundry room. Sheldon, holding his laundry, is looking at the machines in dismay.

Penny: Oh, no, are all the machines taken? What are you gonna do?

Sheldon: No problem, I’ll just do my laundry another night.

Penny: Another night? Well, I guess you can try, but deep inside your heart you’ll know that laundry night is always Saturday night.

=> Sheldon: (angrily) Woman, you are playing with forces beyond your ken.

(laughter)

=> Penny: Yeah, well, your ken can kiss my Barbie. **(laughter)**

Sheldon and Penny had a big fight earlier in the episode, and she was “banished” from his cycle of friends. Penny is not happy about it and is determined to seek revenge. Knowing that Sheldon always does laundry in Saturday night, Penny occupies every washing machine in the apartment laundry room deliberately. Infuriated, Sheldon threatens her that she is playing with forces beyond her ken. Usually, one would use “knowledge” in the conversational register, but given that Sheldon is intellectually superior, he uses a more learned word “ken.” Penny challenges him by using the homophone of “ken.” The word “ken” is an uncountable noun meaning knowledge, but it pronounces the same as the masculine given name

“Ken”. One of the most famous figures in popular culture whose name is Ken is a doll that is Barbie’s boyfriend, thus Penny refutes, “your Ken can kiss my Barbie.” It is also a reference to an expletive “kiss one’s ass.” According to BNC, all “ken” without filtering counts 3,195 tokens, but when limiting “ken” as a noun in singular form, the number of tokens drops to 34, which proves that “ken” is seldom used as a uncountable noun meaning “power,” thus it can be considered as a member of advanced vocabulary.

4.2.1.2 Formal register structures

One of the characteristic of formal register structures is applying prescriptive grammar in the spoken language. Consider the following example:

Example 25 (from 322)

Seven years ago. Leonard just moved in with Sheldon, and Sheldon met Howard and Raj for the first time. They did not get along and the three guys wanted to leave Sheldon alone.

←sub-TC 23→

Sheldon: Wait, let me get my jacket. (gets up from his seat) **(laughter)**

Howard: You’re not going with us.

Sheldon: Why not?

Raj: You are the guy that we are trying to get away from. **(laughter)**

=> Sheldon: Oh. (pause) In that case I don’t need my jacket. **(laughter)** And for the record, the correct syntax is, “I am the guy from whom you are trying to get away”. **(laughter)**

(Leonard, Howard and Raj leave in disbelief) **(laughter)**

In the example above, Raj puts the preposition at the end of the sentence in a relative clause structure. Sheldon corrects Raj on record and provides him with a

“correct” sentence, implying that the preposition should not appear at the end of the sentence. In a relative clause structure, prepositions should be put before the relativizer. From this excerpt, we can see that Sheldon is a strict follower of prescriptive grammar, who believes that there is a correct way of using language, and speakers are obliged to adhere to the grammatical laws provided by this authority. The quest for a standardized language is favored by the users of superstandard language. One of the linguistic features of nerds is employing prescriptive grammar because it is part of the superstandard language that nerds tend to use. Thus, Sheldon’s insist on prescriptive grammar corresponds to the stereotype of nerds, and evokes audience’s laughter. In this excerpt, Raj, Howard and Leonard act as reference points to show that Sheldon is even nerdier than them.

Another reason that this excerpt is funny is that Sheldon repeatedly offended Leonard, Howard, and Raj, whom he just met. Raj could not stand it anymore, and he lashed out this on-record, bold face-threatening act. The laughter comes from that it seldom happens in the real world in which audience live, which is an incongruity. Also, Sheldon’s response indicates that he does not regard it as face-threatening, and that he is only explicating the truth. The fact that he couldn’t tell that this constitutes a threatening evokes humor as well. Then, he corrected Raj’s grammar, and Raj takes it as a fight-back to his threatening, and left the room angrily.

Nerds also use complex sentences in conversations. In the following example, Sheldon employs such structures to a policeman who comes to investigate the burglary of the apartment:

Example 26 (from 313)

Leonard and Sheldon's apartment was looted. Two policemen comes to investigate.

←TC 8→

Sheldon: When does the CSI team get here? **(laughter)**

Policeman A: What?

=> Sheldon: **In anticipation of their arrival**, I've bagged some evidence. One of the thieves **had the audacity to quench his thirst** while ransacking our home (gives the policeman an empty can of soda in a plastic bag) **(laughter)**. You should be able to pull some good prints off this. And now, (gives the policeman a card of his fingerprints) here are my prints so you can rule me out as a suspect. **(laughter)**

Leonard: What about me?

=> Sheldon: I'm sorry, Leonard. It's too early to **discount the possibility of this being an inside job**. **(laughter)**

The dependent clause structure is often used in formal or written contexts, yet Sheldon employs it in spoken register, bringing the formality of his discourse up to the written register. The abstract nouns “anticipation” and “arrival” have their verbal counterparts, and using the verbs “anticipate” and “arrive” may be more appropriate in reporting a burglary to the policeman. Moreover, the phrase “have the audacity to + infinitive verb” also belongs to formal register. The phrases “quench one’s thirst” and “discount the possibility of this being an inside job” contains advanced vocabulary and complex structure, and both are signs of a more formal register than oral register.

One can see that the playwrights represent Sheldon as someone overly cautious and somewhat paranoid; and combining his intelligence, the grammatical structures that Sheldon would use tend to be more formal and complex. Since Sheldon is seeking professional help to solve the robbery of their apartment, he may use formal language to make his viewpoint more powerful, or, as the playwrights stereotyping nerds with language use, using formal register across context (i.e. Superstandard language) may increase his nerdiness.

4.2.1.3 Subtle linguistic nuances

Since nerds tend to speak superstandard language, the subtle nuances of language must be carefully considered and negotiated to demonstrate their knowledge and superiority over non-nerds. Consider the following example:

Example 27 (from 220)

←TC 26→

Stuart: What's up?

Sheldon: Well, I've spent the last three hours in an online debate in the DC Comics Batman chatroom, and I need your help.

Stuart: Oh yeah. Those guys can be very stubborn. What's the topic?

Sheldon: I am asserting, in the event that Batman's death proves permanent, that original Robin, Dick Grayson, is the logical successor to the Bat Cowl.

←sub-TC 26→

=> Stuart: Ooh, Sheldon, I'm afraid you couldn't be more wrong.

=> Sheldon: More wrong? Wrong is an absolute state and not subject to gradation.

=> Stuart: Of course it is. It's a little wrong to say a tomato is a vegetable, it's very wrong to say it's a suspension bridge. **(laughter)**

Stuart, who runs the comic book store the four guys frequent, is dating Penny. He

can also be considered as a nerd. When Stuart and Penny are about to enter her apartment, Sheldon appears and asks him some opinions regarding comic book characters. They have some differences in opinion, and Stuart refutes Sheldon by saying that he cannot be “more wrong.” Sheldon, who disagrees with him, sidetracks and pinpoint on the semantics of the word “wrong.” He argues that “wrong” is an absolute adjective, and is unable to compare. Stuart refutes with his own examples. This example shows that nerds tend to pay attention to the nuances of a given subject. The small details are the parts nerds tend to put emphasis on.

The pronunciation of non-English words can also be a source of humor, because it also demonstrates the knowledge of a foreign language.

Example 28 (from 305)

Penny: [two lines omitted] ←TC 5→ Okay, I gotta go.

Leonard: Why?

=> Penny: Because the last me I didn't go, I ended up playing Mystic Warlords of **Ka**.

=> Howard: Not Ka. **Ka'ah**. (laughter)

=> Penny: **Bye'eye**. (laughter)

Leonard: See ya.

Penny is trapped in a strange card game with Leonard, Howard, and Raj, while Sheldon is using computer nearby. She is not enjoying the game and wants to leave. When she finally gets a chance, she bids goodbye to the guys, and implies that she does not like the game called Mystic Warlords of “Ka.” However, this is not the right

name, as Howard corrects her that it is supposed to be called “Ka’ah.” This is a “strange” word for native English speakers because there is an intervocalic glottal stop in the word, which is against phonotactic constraints of English. The word sounds “funny” for native English speakers and is not easy for them to pronounce, yet Howard is able to pronounce it correctly. Despite the fact that Penny does not pronounce Ka’ah correctly, she does not appreciate Howard’s correction, and responds with “Bye’eye” with an intervocalic glottal stop. This can be seen as a subtle refute to Howard’s imposition of correcting her pronunciation boldly on record (i.e. violation of negative politeness).

4.2.2 Sociolinguistic behaviors

The inability of nerds in terms of sociolinguistic competence is compensated by another set their characteristics. Nerds tend to demonstrate their knowledge on various topics and issues, even when it is unnecessary to do so. They also tend to demonstrate their multilingual knowledge to people who lack this knowledge. They engage in in-group humor which centers on scientific and technological topics, and sometimes they give metalinguistic comments on other people’s linguistic behaviors.

4.2.2.1 Demonstration of knowledge

From a series of research reviewed in previous sections, we learn that nerds tend to use superstandard English to construct power and authority over other people in

order to show they are intellectually superior to others. In many scenes of *The Big Bang Theory*, we can see Sheldon exhibiting his extensive anecdotal knowledge. However, it is usually unnecessary for him to do so because he violates the maxim of quantity (provide more than necessary) and manner (prolixity):

Example 29 (from 102)

At Leonard and Sheldon's apartment. Leonard, Sheldon, Howard and Raj are eating dinner together.

←sub-TC 2→

Raj: Are there any chopsticks?

Sheldon: You don't need chopsticks, this is Thai food.

Leonard: Here we go. **(laughter)**

=> Sheldon: Thailand has had the fork since the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Interestingly they don't actually put the fork in their mouth, they use it to put the food on a spoon which then goes into their mouth. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Ask him for a napkin, I dare you! **(laughter)**

The nerds have bought some take-out Thai food to enjoy at Leonard and Sheldon's apartment. Before they begin eating, Raj asks that if there are any chopsticks. Sheldon's answer pragmatically presupposes, or indexes, that the fact that Thai people do not use chopsticks are not known by many. Leonard receives this pragmatic presupposition and thus he says, "here we go," implying that Sheldon is going to demonstrate his knowledge on this issue. Sheldon first explains the history of fork in Thailand, and how Thai people use the forks. Notice the adverb "interestingly," it is a signal that he is making a comparison between the Thais and the (unstated) Americans in terms of using forks. The laughter comes from the fact that

they are casually eating take-out foods, so even if they use chopsticks to eat Thai food, it does not do any harm. From this we can see that Sheldon, a quintessential nerd, pays attention to facts and demonstrates authoritative knowledge at any chance available to him.

Leonard also demonstrates his anecdotal knowledge, but the timing is even worse compared to Sheldon's:

Example 30 (from 201)

In the stairwell. Leonard and Penny comes back home from a date.

←TC 1→

=> Leonard: So you see, what you're eating is not technically yogurt, because it doesn't have enough live acidophilus cultures. It's really just iced milk with carrageenan added for thickness. **(laughter)**

Penny: Oh, that's very interesting.

=> Leonard: It's also not pink and has no berries. **(laughter)**

This episode begins with Leonard explaining the composition of yogurt to Penny when they are on a date. Notice that he uses advanced vocabulary (acidophilus, carrageenan) in his explanation. It is an effective strategy to strengthen the validity of Leonard's claim, but he does not consider the addressee, Penny, does not have rich biochemical knowledge to comprehend this explanation. Also, yogurt is something that is easily available, and to most people the biochemical information about it is quite unnecessary in daily lives, hence the audience laughs. Penny answers, "oh, that's quite interesting" to Leonard, but she indexes otherwise: she is not interested at all.

Due to politeness principle, one should not threaten the other party's negative face, and adding the fact that they are dating, Penny should not say what is on her mind. Audience can catch this joke. However, Leonard takes this utterance literally and continues his explanation about yogurt. The audience laughs at Leonard not being able to detect Penny's "white lie" due to the politeness principle.

When constantly faced with a prolix Sheldon, his friends think of a way to strike back, by changing the subject to an irrelevant one:

Example 31 (from 213)

Scene: The university cafeteria

←TC 1→

Raj: Mmm, gentlemen, I put it to you, the worst tapioca pudding is better than the best pudding of any other flavor.

Sheldon: First off, that is axiomatically wrong, because the best pudding is chocolate. Secondly, the organic structure of tapioca makes it a jiggling bowl of potential death. It is extracted from the plant=

←TC 2→

=> Howard: =Hey, I'm thinking of growing a mustache. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: Ah, no kidding! A Fu Man Chu? A handlebar pencil?

←TC 1 (cont.)→

Sheldon: It is extracted from the plant=

←TC 2 (cont.)→

=> Howard: =I'm not sure yet. You know, George Clooney has one now! **(laughter)**

=> Raj: Really? I once saw him shopping at Ralph's. He was buying tequila.

=> Howard: Oh, you'd think a guy like that would have some kind of booze lackey.

←sub-TC 2→

=> Leonard: Alright this is cruel, we better let him finish before his head explodes.

←TC 1 (cont.)→

=> Howard: Alright Sheldon, why is tapioca=

Sheldon: =(fast) Tapioca is extracted from the root of the plant *Manihot Esculenta*. Due to a high concentration of cyanide it is poisonous in its raw form and lethal if prepared improperly. (begins to pant) **(laughter)**

Raj: Feel better now?

Sheldon: It is also indigenous to Brazil, as is the Cocoa Bean, from which we get chocolate, the best pudding. (to the other three guys) ←sub-TC 2→ And you promised you wouldn't do that anymore!

TC 1 and TC 2 are chopped into many sections because Leonard, Howard, and Raj keep interrupting Sheldon when he tries to elaborate on tapioca. Both sides work hard to grab the floor. The other three guys bring in another topic (TC 2) when Sheldon is still talking (TC 1). The audience can see that it is intentional because Sheldon begins to rant. They do not want to suffer through his flouting of maxim of quantity, so they flout the maxim of relation as a kind of protest and teasing strategy. Sheldon tries very hard to get the floor, but fails to do so, until Leonard lets him to have the floor again.

4.2.2.2 Demonstration of multilingualism

One of the ways to demonstrate knowledge is to show knowledge of foreign languages. In the United States, where monolingualism is the norm, multilingualists are thought to be capable and intelligent if he or she knows certain languages other than English. For example, knowing French or Latin is great symbolic capital (see Bourdieu 1991) in American society because they are symbols of knowledge. Trying hard to impress the ladies, Howard often demonstrates his knowledge of foreign

languages. However, in this sitcom, audience does not know for sure his foreign language ability; we can only judge this from his self-report (in episode 101, where he claims to speak seven languages) and his decorative code-mixing:

Example 32 (from 202)

At the corridor, Penny and a handsome, tall man named Eric, greet with the four men, who just came back from the Renaissance fair in period costumes.

←TC 3→

Penny: Okay, fine, whatever, um, you guys, this is my friend Eric.

Howard: Hello.

Leonard: Hi.

Eric: Hey.

Leonard: So, yeah, good to see you.

Penny: Yeah, yeah, it's good to see you too. (to Eric) We should really go.

Eric: Yeah.

Penny: (leaving) Bye, guys.

Eric: (leaving, to Howard) Like your hat.

=> Howard: Thanks, my mom made it. **(laughter)** ←sub-TC 3→ Penny with a new guy, très awkward. **(laughter)**

The humor at the place of the first laughter is rooted from Jewish stereotypes, and it will be discussed in sections to come. The laughter is partly due to the awkwardness of the scene (Penny and Leonard broke up after just one date in the last episode), and partly due to Howard's decorative code-mixing. "Très" is a French word meaning "very," and it is not necessary to borrow this word from French. In fact, Howard can just say, "Penny with a new guy, very awkward." The French adverb *très* does not carry the sentiment of prestige and formality or the function of irony and dramatic effects, as with the case of "au contraire" and "on the contrary". Perhaps it

reinforces the intensity of emphasis to some degree, but this unnecessary code-mixing is incongruous with normal situation, hence the laughter.

In the following example, Sheldon opts to speak the sentence he intends to emphasize in Latin. Different from the decorative code-mixing from the last example, this instance of code-mixing has its significance:

Example 33 (from 322)

Seven years ago. Sheldon was interviewing Leonard before he was allowed to move in to live with him.

←TC 6→

Sheldon: Have a seat.

Leonard: OK.

(Leonard tries to sit on one of the chairs)

Sheldon: No, that's where I sit! **(laughter)**

Leonard: What's the difference?

Sheldon: This seat is ideally located both in relation to the heat source in the winter and the cross breeze in the summer. It also faces the television in the direct angle, allowing me to immerse myself in entertainment or game-play without being subjected to conversation. As a result, I've placed it in the state of the eternal dips. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Can you do that?

=> Sheldon: **Cathedra mea, regulae meae.** **(laughter)** That's Latin for "my chair, my rules." **(laughter)**

Sheldon chooses Latin to announce his rules because Latin has been a powerful language. It was the language of Roman Empire and medieval Catholic Church, and its authority and symbolic power continues to today, despite the fact that Latin has been pronounced as a dead language. One of the most famous Latin quotes is "Veni, vidi, vici", to which Sheldon tries to parallel his "rules". The Latin sentence sounds

comical because Sheldon tries to demonstrate that he is more intelligent (his knowledge of Latin) and more powerful (the symbolic power of Latin in Occidental culture) than Leonard by using Latin; however, it does not justify his reason, only intensifies his tyrannical attitude. The Latin sentence somehow backfires and highlights Sheldon's being unreasonable and obstinate, and it triggers laughter. The translation that follows the Latin phrase is unnecessary because the true meaning of this sentence diminishes the "power" and "intelligence" of the Latin sentence, hence another laughter.

Not only they have the knowledge of many languages, but they also speak a constructed language, Klingon.

Example 34 (from 207)

At Leonard and Sheldon's apartment. The four guys are playing Klingon boggles.

←TC 1→

Sheldon: Time. Alright Klingons, pencils down.

=> Leonard: Okay, I have **pokh**. (laughter)

All: Have it./Got it.

=> Leonard: **Potl**. (laughter)

All: Yup./Have it.

=> Leonard: **Pukhpa**. (laughter)

All: Have it./Yup.

=> Howard: I have **Chorrr**. (laughter)

Raj & Sheldon: Got it.

=> Howard: **Nekhmakh**. (laughter)

Raj & Sheldon: Yeah.

Howard: And Kreplach.

Raj: Hold on a second. Kreplach?

Howard: Yeah.

Raj: That isn't Klingon; it's Yiddish for meat-filled dumpling. **(laughter)**

Howard: Well, as it turns out, it's also a Klingon word.

Leonard: Really? Define it.

Howard: Kreplach, A hearty Klingon (pause) dumpling. **(laughter)**

Raj: Judge's ruling?

=> Sheldon: (thumb down) **Bilurrrbe**. **(laughter)**

The four nerds are competing on the knowledge of vocabulary of Klingon language, a constructed language created by American linguist Marc Okrand specifically for the popular sci-fi enterprise, *Star Trek*. In the series, it is spoken by the Klingons, a race of humanoid aliens. The Klingon language has its own orthography, also created by Okrand. The fact that all four nerds can speak Klingon demonstrates that they are Star Trek fans, which is a common stereotype for nerds; also, they are capable of speaking another language and pronouncing sounds that are foreign to mainstream Americans, who are mostly monolingual. Multilingualism among Americans is less common in other parts of the world, thus, American people who can speak more than one language are considered stereotypically as more intelligent. Therefore, demonstrating multilingualism is a way to show that one is intellectually superior. The unusual pronunciation of Klingon, which employs many phonemes non-existent in English, also contributes to humor because of its peculiarity. The competition is not easy to begin with, but the fact that Raj has the ability of tell Yiddish from Klingon further demonstrates his multilingualism, and stereotypically smarter.

In the following example, we can see that not every language is as valuable as French or Latin does in American society:

Example 35 (from 309)

←TC 10→

Raj: I was on the radio once. I called in to Fever 104 FM New Delhi and was the fourth person to say the phrase that pays, “Fever 104, ashkenay ke chish ka’a kat” (laughter) That means: “Fever 104, home of the really good current music.” (silence) (laughter) It’s much catchier in Hindi. (laughter)

Raj brings about an anecdote that he once called a radio station in New Delhi. He says a sentence in Hindi, and it evokes laughter of the audience. To American audience who does not speak Hindi, this sentence sounds exotic and interesting. But to keep the conversation going, Raj is required to explain what it means since the other three guys do not speak Hindi. However, after the explanation is given, the “aura” and the exotic feeling of the sentence are gone, leading to the silence after the explanation, thus concludes Raj, “it’s much catchier in Hindi.” This example tells us that Hindi lacks the force of French and Latin does in the U.S. The audience does not laugh because of the “extra factor” that speaking Hindi brings, but the silence that follows it.

4.2.2.3 In-group humor of nerd

Telling jokes that can only be understood by people of a certain group creates solidarity and identity among the members. Naturally, nerds, being a label of a social group, tell jokes among themselves. In the sitcom, the four nerds share jokes that can

only be understood by them, not people outside their group:

Example 36 (from 109)

At an academic conference. Leonard is going to present a paper. Howard, Raj, and Penny also attend the conference.

←TC 22→

[omitting five lines]

Leonard: I wasn't expecting such a crowd, I'm a little nervous.

Howard: It's okay, just open with a joke, you'll be fine.

=> Leonard: A joke. Okay. How about this, um, okay, uh there's this farmer, and he has these chickens, but they won't lay any eggs. So, he calls a physicist to help. The physicist then does some calculations, and he says, um, I have a solution, but it only works with spherical chickens in a vacuum. *(Leonard, Raj and Howard laugh, Penny is completely lost)* **(laughter)**
Right?

The scene takes place outside a conference hall, where Leonard is going to present a paper that he and Sheldon co-authored. Howard, Raj, and Penny all go to the conference to support him. On a side note, Sheldon stays at home because he does not want his research to be “judged by the lesser minds”. Leonard is very nervous because there is a huge crowd (i.e., 25 people) in the conference room, and Howard suggests him to tell a joke as an icebreaker. Leonard thus tells the physicist joke, and after the joke, the three nerds laugh uncontrollably, while Penny is completely lost. This is a joke that non-physicist audience do not understand, as we can see from the place that laughter appears. The audience laughs at Penny's inability to comprehend the joke, not the joke itself, because it is too difficult to comprehend for non-physicists.

The physicist joke pokes fun at physicists' not being practical but too theoretical.

Nevertheless, for the average audience, the incongruity of the chicken and the physicist is too hard to perceive. This fact indexes that if one comprehend this joke, he or she belongs to the group of physicists, or in the context of the sitcom, that of nerds. We can see that nerds are represented as people who tell incomprehensible jokes to distinguish themselves from others outside the group, and simultaneously reassure their membership to the group.

4.2.2.4 Metalinguistic comment

Metalanguage is a form of language that is employed to discuss or describe the structure of language. If a language user is able to use language to critique on language itself, then he/she can be seen as intellectually superior to those who are not able to do so. In the following example, Sheldon describes the reason why the language used his friends are humorous:

Example 37 (from 222)

←sub-TC 1→

=> Leonard: Just think. Thanks to your hard work, an international crew of astronauts will boldly go where no man has gone before. **(laughter)**

Howard: Is that supposed to be funny?

=> Sheldon: I believe it is. The combination of the Star Trek reference and the play on words involving the double-meaning of the verb “to go” suggests that Leonard is humorously mocking your efforts in space plumbing.
(laughter)

Howard: Okay, make your little jokes, but of the four of us, I’m the only one making any real-world contribution to science and technology.

=> Raj: He’s right. This is an important achievement, for two reasons. Number one, and, of course, (starts to laugh) number two. **(laughter)**

=> Sheldon: Oh, clever! Playing on the use of cardinal numbers as euphemisms for bodily functions. **(laughter)**

Howard is proud of himself because he built a high-tech toilet in the international space station, and Leonard teases him that Howard's achievement will take the astronaut "to go where no man has gone before." Howard's response to Leonard is, "Is that supposed to be funny?" This should also be sarcastic because he is aware that Leonard is teasing him, and he is not particularly fond of it. But Sheldon, again, takes the question as a genuine one, thus providing his answers and his understanding to Leonard's words. Howard says he does not care that he built a space toilet, at least, according to him, is a contribution in the real-world among them. Raj then follows Leonard to tease him, and Sheldon yet again gives metalinguistic comments, assuming that Howard does not truly understand if it is supposed to be funny. The unsolicited advice from Sheldon is incongruent to conversation principles, hence the laughter from the audience.

4.2.3 Technology mastery

Familiar with Internet world can be seen as a characteristic to nerds, as they are considered as technology-savvy people. One of the characteristics of modern-day technological mastery is engaging in Internet culture, one of the examples is emoticon:

Example 38 (from 301)

Howard: ←sub-TC 8→ And then when we found our first positive data, you were so happy.

=> Sheldon: Oh, yes. In the world of emoticons, I was colon, capital D (leans his head and smiles). **(laughter)**

Howard: Well, in actuality, what your equipment detected wasn't so much evidence of paradigm-shifting monopolies as it was (pause) static from the electric can opener we were turning on and off.

(Sheldon is shocked, with his mouth open) **(laughter)**

=> Raj: He just went colon, capital O. **(laughter)**

In between the two TCs, Sheldon mentions the emoticon of smile (:D) to represent his current state of mind. Since nerds are thought to be people who have strong computer skills, and who surf the Internet very often, it is not surprised that emoticon becomes one of the source domain of nerds to make metaphors. After Howard and Raj's shocking revelation to Sheldon, Raj also mentions another emotion (:O), which indicates that he is also knowledgeable of emoticons. The mention of emoticons also contributes the stereotype of nerds, since they tend to spend a lot of time online.

Nerds are considered to be not masculine enough by the mainstream American society, even if they are stereotypically and biologically male. However, they do not regard themselves as not being masculine, but they perform their masculinity differently. Consider the following example:

Example 39 (from 102)

Leonard and Sheldon are trying to move a big piece of furniture upstairs for

Penny.

←TC 7→

Leonard: [omitting three lines] I guess we'll just bring it up ourselves.

Sheldon: I::: hardly think so. **(laughter)**

Leonard: Why not?

Sheldon: Well, we don't have a dolly, or lifting belts, or any measurable upper body strength. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: We don't need strength, we're physicists. We are the intellectual descendents of Archimedes. Give me a fulcrum and a lever and I can move the Earth, it's just a matter... *(starts to move package)* I don't have this... **(laughter)** I don't have this I don't have this. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: Archimedes would be so proud. **(laughter)**

[two lines omitted]

Leonard and Sheldon are trying to move a heavy object upstairs. Sheldon admits that neither of them have any tools or any physical power to move it. Physical power is an index to mainstream American masculinity; however, Leonard protests that they are physicists, and they have powerful brain instead of muscles to solve the problem. It is also an index to masculinity, but of a different kind: Leonard declares that they are also powerful, but it is their internal ability rather than their physical strengths. He even quoted Archimedes to prove that he makes a point. Nevertheless, Leonard fails to move the heavy object, thus nullifying his claim. The incongruity between Leonard's claim and the fact causes humor, and the fact that Sheldon does not support his claim with an irony further intensifies the humor.

When Leonard's method failed to work, he asks Sheldon if he had better ideas.

Sheldon's response causes laughter because his method is an allusion to a comic book

series, which in actuality is impossible to apply in the real world. The fact that Sheldon can instantly think of a reference to a comic book shows that nerds are crazy about comic books. They are not good at physical work, but they emphasize their mastery on technology and knowledge.

This shows that nerds have the wish to demonstrate their masculinity, but usually they fail because very often they lack the physical strength that is essential to traditional masculinity.

4.3 Nerds as sci-fi, comic book and video games fans

The main pastimes of the four nerds in *The Big Bang Theory* are depicted as reading comic books, watching sci-fi movies and television series, playing video and online games and going to the comic book store. They are so fanatic about this genre of entertainment that they are able to recite the lines and analyze the plot of a comic book series or sci-fi movies and series.

Example 40 (from 321)

At Raj's apartment. Dr. Elizabeth Plimpton, Sheldon's pen pal, comes to stay in Raj's place for one night.

←TC 40→

Elizabeth: Can I ask you a question, Howard? Do you like role-playing games?

Howard: Yeah, sure. In fact, I'm a dungeon master. **(laughter)**

Elizabeth: Not tonight. Tonight you are a delivery man. You brought soup, but uh-oh, Raj and I don't have enough money to pay you. So we'll have to come to some other kind of arrangement. **(laughter)**

Howard: (pause) Beg your pardon?

Elizabeth: You two figure out the details, I'm going to go change into something I don't mind getting ripped off my milky flesh. (goes into Raj's room)

(laughter)

←sub-TC 40→

=> Howard: What the frak? **(laughter)**

Raj: Go away! She wants New Delhi, not Kosher deli. **(laughter)**

Howard's expletive "What the frak?" comes from a classic sci-fi television series, *Battlestar Galactica*. It was on air from 1978 to 1979, and since it was on network television, expletives were censored by the FCC, and thus the word "frack" was coined to replace the four-letter word. The series was "re-imagined" and back on air from 2003 to 2009, bringing back the popularity of this enterprise. In the new version of the series, the spelling was changed to "frak" to coincide with four-letter spelling. Since Howard can employ an in-group jargon that is only circulating in the fandom of *Battlestar Galactica*, one can conclude that he is an avid fan.

Here is another example:

Example 41 (from 212)

←TC 13→

=> Leonard: Okay, don't take this as a criticism, but you kind of have that overexposed-to-gamma-rays thing going on.

Penny: What does that mean?

=> Leonard: You know, like, most of the time, you're the easygoing Bruce Banner, but then, when you get angry, you kind of turn into, like, you know, grrrrr! **(laughter)**

Penny: I turn into a bear? **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: Seriously? Gamma rays? Bruce Banner? You didn't get *The Incredible Hulk* from that? **(laughter)**

One of the features of nerds is that they are very familiar with comic books and sci-fi works that they often refer to the characters and events in these fictional worlds. In this scene, Leonard comments that when Penny gets angry, she is like the green giant monster The Hulk from the comics *The Incredible Hulk*. The Hulk is an alter ego of Dr. Bruce Banner, a reserved and observant physicist. He first turns into Hulk because he accidentally overexposed himself to gamma rays when the new type of bomb he was working on exploded during experiment. Leonard compares Dr. Banner's transformation to Hulk with the usual Penny and the angry Penny. However, Penny does not understand this metaphor. The first time, she asks Leonard directly, "What does that mean?" The second time when Leonard utters the howling sound of Hulk, she thinks that it is the sound of a bear. Finally, Leonard is surprised that Penny does not understand this metaphor. The audience laughed because Leonard assumes that Penny knows this allusion to Hulk, but in fact, only people who are familiar with the world of comic books, usually nerds, can easily appreciate this comparison.

Another series, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, is the premise of a whole episode:

Example 42 (317)

The four guys are searching in the big box.

←TC 8→

Sheldon: (takes out a ring from the box) Fascinating.

Leonard: What?

Sheldon: It appears to be a Lord of the Rings ring.

Leonard: Oh.

Raj: It's even got the Elvish engraving on it.

=> Sheldon: It's not Elvish. It's the language of Mordor written in Elvish script.
←sub-TC 8→ (raises the ring) One Ring to rule them all.
=> Raj: (takes the ring) One Ring to find them.
=> Howard: (takes the ring) One Ring to bring them all.
=> Leonard: (takes the ring) And in the darkness bind them. (They smile at the ring)
(laughter)
=> Raj: Holy crap, are we nerdy. **(laughter)**

In this episode, the four guys bought a box full of old comic book memorabilia in a garage sale. Among the old toys and comic books, they found a ring that looked like the ring in the Lord of the Rings movies. Sheldon is such a fan that they can identify the orthography engraved on it is Mordor language written in Elvish script. After they identified the ring, they began to recite the lines in the film with precision, leading to Raj's remark that they are all nerds.

4.4 Ethnic stereotypes

Aside from the stereotype of nerd, the stereotype of ethnicity in *The Big Bang Theory* is significant, since two of the main characters, Howard and Raj, constantly refer to their own ethnicities; likewise, other characters make such references as well. The following sections will discuss the two main ethnic stereotypes featuring in the show: Jewish and Indian. Other kinds of ethnic stereotypes are featured in the sitcom as well.

4.4.1 Jewish

In this series, Howard being Jewish is usually brought up by himself and the

other characters to serve as a punchline. In the following excerpt, Leonard's mother, Dr. Beverly Hofstadter, an established neuroscientist and psychologist, comes for a visit. Leonard invites her to visit the campus and have lunch with his friends. Howard and Raj intentionally bring up Leonard's more successful siblings to anger him, thus Leonard seeks revenge:

Example 43 (from 215)

At the university cafeteria. The four men and Beverly are having lunch. She just came back from the lavatory.

←TC 17→

Beverly: So where were we?

Leonard: (fast) Howard lives with his mother and Raj can't speak to women unless he's drunk. Go! **(laughter)**

(Leonard sits back, satisfied with himself. Howard and Raj are shocked at these revelations.) **(laughter)**

=> Beverly: Oh, that's fascinating. Selective mutism is quite rare. On the other hand, an adult Jewish male living with his mother is so common it borders on sociological cliché. **(laughter)**

In this example, Leonard begins this topic chain with a direct on-record accusation on Howard and Raj because they just told on him to his mother, Beverly, in previous TCs. Leonard is trying to retaliate, so he draws attention to their ethnicities with the strategy of violation of negative politeness. The reason why this retaliation is successful is that in American culture, the image of Jewish mother has become a stock character widely used by Jewish comedians and writers to describe their mother. That is to say, it is a popular stereotype. Josefowitz Siegel, Cole, and Steinberg-Oren (2000)

compile a list of Jewish mother stereotypes in American society: nagging, overprotective, manipulative, controlling, smothering, and overbearing; someone who persists in interfering in her children's lives long after they have become adults. In *The Big Bang Theory*, Howard's mother never appears, but she has loud voice and always treats Howard like a boy, despite his protest. It is obvious that Howard's mother is a stock character, and all the mocking and laughing toward a stock character is common. In addition, another stock character, "nice Jewish boy," also circulates in both Jewish American community and mainstream American society. By definition, a nice Jewish boy is someone who embraces and adheres to the qualities of studiousness, gentleness and sensitivity. He is willing to accept the control and intervention from his caring, and sometimes overbearing mother. However, this kind of image is sometimes ridiculed as lack of mainstream American masculinity. Howard somewhat fits into these descriptions because of his high academic achievement. These facts make Beverly to conclude that "it borders on sociological cliché", since these are entrenched stereotypes in the heart of the mainstream American audience, and Beverly boldly comments it with a detached, authoritative tone, and thus it triggers laughter.

Other than other people's indication of Jewish stereotypes, Howard also mocks himself with Jewish stereotypes.

Example 44 (from 315)

←TC 4→

Leonard: Hey, what are you and Bernadette doing for your first Valentine's Day?

Howard: Yeah, I am pulling out all the stops. There's a \$39.95 lover's special at P.F. Chang's. Egg rolls, dumplings, bottomless wok, and you get your picture taken on the big marble horse out front. **(laughter)**

←sub-TC 4→

Sheldon: Given that Saint Valentine was a third century Roman priest who was stoned and beheaded, wouldn't a more appropriate celebration of the evening be taking one's steady gal to witness a brutal murder? **(laughter)**

=> Howard: I understand your point, but given a choice, Jews always go with Chinese food. **(laughter)**

For Jewish Americans, the type of food that they prefer other than Jewish is Chinese food. The origin of this preference, according to the website of "Judaism 101," could be that Chinese restaurants are the only restaurants open on Christmas Day. Since Jews do not celebrate Christmas, they do not have many restaurants to choose from on that day, for most restaurants are closed. Therefore, Chinese restaurants are the only option available. In addition, for Jews who follow kosher (i.e. Jewish dietary laws), Chinese food is a great dietary option because Chinese generally do not mix milk and meat in a dish, which is strictly forbidden in kosher. That Jews go to Chinese restaurants on Christmas Day has become a holiday tradition for Jews to some extent in the U.S. In the example above, Sheldon suggests a rather peculiar way of celebrating Valentine's Day instead of Howard's original plan of going to a Chinese restaurant, and Howard declines the suggestion with an established Jewish

stereotype between Jews and Chinese food.

Example 45 (from 301)

Penny: Well, you're not gonna go with them?

Leonard: Well, you know, I gave you the snowflake and we were kissing and...

Oh, come on, I don't want to go to Texas!

=> Howard: Oh, right, and I do? My people already crossed a desert once, we're done.

(laughter)

After Sheldon learned that Leonard, Howard and Raj tampered with the Arctic experiment results, Sheldon is heartbroken, so he quits his job at the university and returns to his hometown in Texas without notifying any of his friends. Howard and Raj rushes to Leonard and Sheldon's apartment and ask Leonard to go to Texas and apologize to Sheldon. Nevertheless, Leonard does not want to go to Texas because he wants to spend some time with Penny. Howard does not want to go, either, and he claims that his people "already crossed a desert once," so they are done. The background knowledge known to the audience is that Howard is a Jew, and he clearly refers to the story of the Exodus. In the Book of Exodus, Moses led the Israelites to cross the desert in order to escape from the Egyptians. They made their journey through the wilderness and eventually arrived Mount Sinai. Howard cites this story as his excuse of not going to Texas to apologize to Sheldon. One has to have the prior knowledge of the story of Exodus to get the joke.

4.4.2 Indian

In the United States, the Indian American communities enjoy disproportionate socioeconomic success than that of the national average. In terms of academic performance, Indian people have proportionally the highest rate to attain higher education diploma among the minorities in the U.S (cited from Census 2000 Special Reports). Given that India are always considered to be a part of the Third World, it has become a stereotype in mainstream America that Indian students in American academia come from very poor conditions and work hard all their way to success and achievement, and this stereotype is even more emphasized after the great success of the 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* in the West. In the following excerpt, however, Raj exploits such stereotype in order to impress women:

Example 46 (from 312)

At a university mixer that Sheldon and Raj attend. Sheldon and Raj meet two young Caucasian ladies.

Abby: Hi, Raj. ←TC 16→ Where do you come from?

=> Raj: The mysterious subcontinent India. **(laughter)**

Abby: Ooh, India.

Raj: You know India?

Abby: I saw *Slumdog Millionaire*.

=> Raj: Well, I am a slumdog astrophysicist. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: (pause) I thought your father was a gynaecologist. **(laughter)**

Raj not only states that he comes from India, but from “mysterious subcontinent” India. This is a reflection of Orientalism, that is, the East is a mystical, exotic, yet confusing place. The emphasis of India being a subcontinent fortifies such image that

India is a vast and incredible place waiting to be explored. This triggers laughter as the audience knows that Raj, being one of the main characters, is anything but mysterious. Abby is pleasantly surprised, as one can tell from her response with an initial discourse marker *Ooh*. Raj tests her knowledge about India so that his tricks will not be unmasked; Abby answers with the famous Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire*, which tells a story about a homeless boy who wins a Q&A game show, and his romance and harsh life on the streets. Raj claims to be a “slumdog astrophysicist” to impress Abby because he represents himself to come from humble beginnings and eventually earns great accomplishments. This is, of course, not the case, hence the laughter. Sheldon does not help Raj to cover his lie, but adds that his father is a gynecologist, implying that Raj actually comes from an affluent family. From this excerpt, we can see that the exploitation of stereotypes can be one of the ways to create humor.

Another example focuses on the career choice of Indians:

Example 47 (from 304)

Raj: [two lines omitted] ←TC 21→ So, that’s it. That was my last hope. I’m going to be deported, sent home in disgrace, exposed to the sardonic barbs of my cousin Sanjay, or, as you may know him, Dave from AT&T customer service.

(laughter)

Raj is going to be deported in this episode and after the failed interview to a potential new job at the university, Raj bids goodbye to his friends. He notes that his

cousin Sanjay is going to cruelly mock him when he returns to India, and he adds that Sanjay is also known as Dave from AT&T customer service. This triggers laughter because it is an established stereotype that American corporations usually outsource its call center/customer service to India. Many Indians who have strong linguistic ability may find a job in this sector. The Indians who works at outsourced call centers have to adopt Standard American English accent when they are on their jobs, and sometimes, they have to assume a non-indigenous name (i.e. a typical American name, such as Dave) when answering calls from the U.S. The characterization of Sanjay matches the stereotype, thus evoking laughter from the audience.

In the next example, the script writer employs ingenious metonymy and homophones to refer to Raj's and Howard's ethnicities:

Example 48 (from 321)

At Raj's apartment. Dr. Elizabeth Plimpton, Sheldon's pen pal, comes to stay in Raj's place for one night.

←TC 40→

Elizabeth: Can I ask you a question, Howard? Do you like role-playing games?

Howard: Yeah, sure. In fact, I'm a dungeon master. **(laughter)**

Elizabeth: Not tonight. Tonight you are a delivery man. You brought soup, but uh-oh, Raj and I don't have enough money to pay you. So we'll have to come to some other kind of arrangement. **(laughter)**

Howard: (pause) Beg your pardon?

Elizabeth: You two figure out the details, I'm going to go change into something I don't mind getting ripped off my milky flesh. (goes into Raj's room)

←sub-TC 40→

Howard: What the frak? **(laughter)**

=> Raj: Go away. She wants New Delhi, not Kosher deli. **(laughter)**

Dr. Elizabeth Plimpton is a physicist professor who comes to visit her pen pal, Sheldon. According to Sheldon, Dr. Plimpton hates to stay at hotels, so she would like to stay at Sheldon's or his friend's place. After she spent the night with Leonard, she requests that she spends another night in Raj's apartment because Sheldon is bothered by Leonard's behavior. Raj accepts the offer, not realizing that she is seductive and promiscuous. Raj becomes fascinated to Dr. Plimpton and is excited about what is about to come. At the same time, Howard comes to Raj's apartment and invites him to play video games together. Dr. Plimpton seduces Howard as well, but Raj wants him to leave, saying that Dr. Plimpton wants "New Delhi, not Kosher deli."

The script writer is playing with homophones of "Delhi" and "deli," and simultaneously states their respective ethnicities: New Delhi is the capital of India, representing Raj's ethnicity; Kosher is the dietary rule of Jewish people, representing Howard's. The clever metonymy triggers laughter.

In the next example, skin color is also an aspect of ethnicity:

Example 49 (from 217)

←TC 7→

Raj: Hang on a sec. Why do you get first crack at her?

Howard: Um, well, let's see, couple reasons. One, I saw her first.

Raj: No, you didn't. I did.

Howard: Fair enough. **(laughter)** But then let me move on to number two, unlike you, I can actually talk to women when I'm sober.

Raj: You fail to take into account that even mute, I am foreign and exotic, while you, on the other hand, are frail and pasty. **(laughter)**
=> Howard: Well, you know the old saying, pasty and frail never fail. **(laughter)**

Raj and Howard are fighting for the attention of Summer Glau, a famous and a beautiful sci-fi actress who they meet unexpectedly on a train. Raj says that he should approach her first because he sees her first. Howard argues that he does not have to be drunk to talk to women. Raj reproaches that he is exotic even when he is mute, and Howard is frail and pasty. The audience laughs because this is the truth, but Raj is too direct in pointing that out, violating negative politeness. Howard, who is met with solid accusation, makes up a proverb, “Pasty and frail never fail.” This is of course a non-existent proverb, but it sounds like a proverb because “frail” and “fail” rhymes. However, the proverb does not make sense at all, since the meaning of “pasty” and “frail” are negative, and it is impossible for someone with two negative qualities to “never fail.” The ridiculousness in the meaning of the proverb triggers laughter from the audience.

4.4.3 Other ethnic stereotypes

One of the ways to bring up the issue of ethnicity is the accent people carry. In *The Big Bang Theory*, accent is also a source of humor. Since Raj comes from New Delhi, he speaks English with a Hindi accent, but his accent does not cause communication breakdown. However, in the following examples, accent is parodied

in order to poke fun at Standard American English (SAE) speakers:

Example 50 (from 308)

Leonard, Howard and Raj are camping in the mountains to see meteor shower. They accidentally eat cookies with marijuana from the grandma hippies camping nearby. They are lying down, looking at the stars and are high.

←TC 19→

Howard: (speaks softly) Stars are pretty, aren't they?

(Raj begins to laugh)

Leonard: What's so funny?

=> Raj: It's your American accent. Everything you say sounds stupid. **(laughter)**

(With an American accent) Stars are pretty, aren't they? **(laughter)**

Under the influence of marijuana, they begin to behave weirdly and say things that should not have been said. This can also be considered as an example of mismatching of styles. Raj's bold comment on the relationship between American accent and Americans' stupidity can be taken as an offensive remark, but in the context of sitcom and given that he was high when saying this render his comment a humorous and an innocuous one.

The playwrights use this punchline to address to the issue of accented English. Throughout the series, Raj, being an Indian, speaks with fluent yet accented American English, which symbolizes the fact that Raj is a "foreigner," and always will be if his accent remains unchanged. Raj will not be unable to escape this outsider position, however integrated in mainstream American culture he is. Under the influence of marijuana, he somehow tells what he really thinks and fights back on the prejudice

being added to foreigners living in America. He plays on American stereotypes that they are not especially intelligent, and the fact that the label “nerd” carries the ideology of anti-intellectualism to some extent. After he comments that Americans sound stupid, he even tries to parody (Caucasian) Americans’ speech. Raj makes a strong claim by performing this act that although he is aware that he is seen as foreigner by his Hindi accent, he has no intention to adapt to (Caucasian) American English, for it sounds “stupid”.

Raj is not the only one that is perceived as different as having an accent. It is made clear that Penny comes from Nebraska, a state in the Midwest. In the following example, Sheldon and Penny are going to the traffic court, and Sheldon writes Penny a defense in order to plead for Sheldon.

Example 51 (from 316)

Sheldon and Penny are going to a traffic court. Sheldon instructs Penny on how to defend for him, since he received a speeding ticket when driving Penny to the hospital after she had slipped and broke her arm in the bathroom while taking a shower.

←TC 13→

Sheldon: Wait, hold on. Before we get to the courthouse, I’d like to call on your skills as an actress. (hands her a piece of paper)

Penny: What is this?

Sheldon: I’ve taken the liberty of scripting your appearance on the witness stand because, let’s face it, you’re somewhat of a loose cannon. **(laughter)** (gives Penny a piece of paper) Now, don’t worry, **it’s written in your vernacular.** So shall we rehearse?

Penny: Do I have a choice?

Sheldon: Well, of course you have a choice. Although we live in a deterministic universe, each individual has free will. **(laughter)** Now, sit down. ←sub-TC

13→ I call your attention to the events of November 16. Do you remember that date?

Penny: (reading) **Darn tootin'**, I do, **(laughter)** if the court will excuse **my homespun, corn-fed Nebraskan turn of phrase.** **(laughter)**

Sheldon: Excellent. Go on.

Penny: (reading) The reason that date is, **like, so totally** fixed in my memory is that I had the privilege to be witness to one of the most heroic acts I've ever seen in, **like,** ever. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: And who performed that heroic act?

Penny: (reading) **Why,** you did, sir. You. Dr. Sheldon Cooper, and may I add, it is a privilege to know you. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: There's no need for compliments, this court is only interested in the facts. **(laughter)**

Penny: (reading) But it is a fact that it's a privilege to know you. **Totally.** **(laughter)**
(to Sheldon) A teardrop rolls down my cheek?

Sheldon: Only a suggestion. A catch in your throat would work just as well.

Penny: (pretending to be close to tears) But it is a fact that it's a privilege to know you. **Totally.** **(laughter)**

Sheldon: Maybe you should put on your JUICY pants again. **(laughter)**

In Season 3 Episode 8, Penny broke her arms while taking a shower, and she asked Sheldon to drive her to the hospital. Sheldon, who is not good at driving, went to slow on the road and received a ticket. He refused to pay the ticket, and decided to follow legal procedure and bring the case to the traffic court. Penny, who is a witness in this case, is demanded by Sheldon to go to the court with him. Sheldon is worried that Penny does not know how to defend him, so he writes down a script and tells Penny to follow his instructions. In this instruction, one can see that Sheldon casts his stereotype (or more precisely, society's stereotype) in the script for Penny. To begin with, he tells Penny that it is written in her "vernacular," but the audience can see that

the “vernacular” that Sheldon thinks Penny speaks projects the stereotypes of hillbillies or rednecks. Both of these social groups in the United States are considered rural, uncivilized, and unsophisticated. In terms of their linguistic stereotype, as Sheldon suggests, they are thought to speak with slang associated with agriculture, rural and rustic surroundings, such as “darn tootin’,” “homespun,” and “corn-fed.” To represent them as unsophisticated, the lines assigned to Penny are filled with fillers “like” and “so,” intensifier “totally,” and also, sentence-initial filler “why,” which serves as an interjection. Penny is represented by Sheldon as someone who is simple, rustic, honest, respectful to intelligent people (i.e. “It’s a privilege to know you”), and emotional (i.e. a teardrop rolls down on her cheek). It shows that language is also a means to construct stereotype of a certain social group. The audience laughs because they are aware that the playwrights are making fun of the stereotypes associated with certain social groups through linguistic means.

4.5 Mismatch of linguistic style

Despite the fact that nerds are represented as people who employ formal register across contexts, they are also represented as people who want to integrate into popular culture. In the following example, we can see that the playwrights want to mold Raj and Howard as characters who desire to be cool:

Example 52 (from 213)

At the university cafeteria.

Howard: C'mon, don't let him get to you. It's Kripke.

=> Raj: Yeah, he's a **ginormous knob**. (laughter)

=> Howard: That's why he eats by himself, instead of sitting here at the cool table.
(laughter)

=> Raj: **Fo' shizzle**. (laughter)

Sheldon is annoyed by the comments of Kripke, one of their colleagues. After Kripke left, Howard tells Sheldon that he shouldn't be sad because that's what Kripke wants. Raj adds that Kripke is a "ginormous knob." The two words are slang, and Raj, being an astrophysicist, does not usually use slang in conversation. "Ginormous" is a slang coined by the coalescence of two words, "gigantic" and "enormous", meaning "bigger than gigantic or enormous". The slang usage "knob" is synonymous with "dick (slang usage)," "asshole," or someone with an undesirable character. Howard, agreeing with Raj, adds that this is why Kripke is not at the "cool table." A second laughter ensues because nerds are seen as antithesis to being cool in American society, and Howard's statements is contradictory to social norms. Raj continues to pile on, replying "fo' shizzle," the slang expression of "for sure." The audience laughs again because the style of slang is incompatible to Raj's everyday style.

From the discussions above, it can be concluded that the language of nerds constitutes a certain style. But in the following example, the playwrights play with such style and juxtapose it with a clashing style in order to create incongruity in the

script:

Example 53 (from 102)

At the apartment lobby. Sheldon and Leonard are trying to move a piece of heavy furniture up to Penny's apartment. The elevator is out of order, so they take the stairs.

←sub-TC 7→

[omitting ten lines]

Leonard: Oh, okay, uh, okay, yeah, no problem, just come up here and help me pull and turn.

Sheldon heads up the stairs. The package slides back down to the bottom.

(laughter)

=> Sheldon: Ah, gravity, thou art a heartless bitch. **(laughter)**

In this scene, Leonard and Sheldon try very hard to move a big piece of furniture upstairs. Since the elevator is out of order, it is very hard for the furniture to go across the corner of the staircase. Sheldon quotes the famous saying from the Shakespearean play *Hamlet*. It has been so popular that it has become a catch phrase in the English language. The original line is “Frailty, thy name is women.” In this excerpt, the expression is modified into “gravity, thou art....” This is a kind of archaism that intends to emphasize the style of English in the 16th century. However, the humor comes from the clash of styles: “a heartless bitch” is an expletive in contemporary English, which does not go with the archaic style of the subject and the verb. Also, expletives are not the words that nerds are likely to say. The minor deviation of character is also a source of humor.

When we try to engage in conversations, the wrong choice of styles is not effective, and causes incongruity:

Example 54 (from 218)

The four guys are brainstorming for Penny's business venture, Penny Blossom.

←TC 14→

Leonard: She'd need some kind of industrial cooling system.

Sheldon: Of course, but before we set up a marketing and distribution infrastructure, we should finish optimizing the manufacturing process. To start with, she has a terrible problem with moisture-induced glitter clump.

=> Penny: Yeah, it's a bitch. **(laughter)**

In this episode, Penny decides to launch a home business called Penny Blossom, a homemade hair barrette. The four guys brainstorm to help her optimize the manufacturing business and establish an assembly line. During the discussion, it is obvious that Penny does not understand the procedure of launching a successful manufacturing business, and she can only nod along. The audience can be regarded as people who do not have the knowledge of establishing assembly lines as well, and one can only suppose that there is a major problem in something because the wording that is used to frame the problem is "To start with, she has a terrible problem in..." Penny, who has no clue of what it is about, speaks along the line with "yeah, it's a bitch." The humor lies in that the four guys are discussing serious issues with high formality, while Penny chooses the colloquial expletive "bitch" as a response. The mismatch of formality makes the audience laugh.

Example 55 (from 222)

Howard: [one line omitted] ←sub-TC 7→ Now, here's an approximation of the spare parts available on the Space Station. We gotta find a way, using nothing but this, to reinforce this so the waste material avoids the spinning turbine.

=> Raj: You mean so it doesn't hit the fan? (**laughter**)
[two lines omitted]

Howard designed a space toilet intended for NASA space stations. However, he later finds out that the toilet will be out of order after ten flushes due to design defects. Howard is doing everything he can to figure out a way to fix the toilet with the spare parts available on the space station, and later teach the astronauts to fix the toilet by themselves without reporting him to NASA. His friends are recruited to help him, but after familiarizing themselves with the situation, they eventually come to a dead end. Howard is explaining what he intends to fix the toilet, and Raj responds with "so it doesn't hit the fan?" This is clearly a reference to the colloquial idiom, "when the shit hits the fan." The idiom is used to describe a situation which is out of control, and the consequences are going to be disastrous. Given that the situation in the space station after the toilet breaks down, it would not only satisfy the idiomatic meaning, but literal meaning as well. The pun intended by Raj' comment triggers laughter from the audience.

Example 56 (from 204)

Raj and Penny are going to a TIME magazine party which honors Raj's academic

achievements. Since Raj cannot talk to women other than his family member when he is sober, Raj comes to pick up Penny under the influence of alcohol.

←TC 22→

Penny: Oh, Raj, look at you!

Raj: (holding a glass of champagne) I know, I am resplendent like the noontday sun, am I not? **(laughter)**

Penny: Um, yeah, starting with the champagne a little early aren't you?

Raj: It was in the limo. They sent a limo. I have a limo. I just love saying limo. **(laughter)** Here, sip on this while you're getting ready.

Penny: Oh, I'm ready.

Raj: That's what you're wearing?

Penny: Um, yeah, what's wrong with it?

=> Raj: Nothing, I was just hoping for something a little more, you know, **redonkulous**. **(laughter)**

=> Penny: Yeah, well, this is all the **donkulous** you're gonna get. **(laughter)**

Raj: Okey dokey, let's roll. Alright, it's time to raise the roof. Oo-oooh, oo-oooh. **(laughter)**

The word "redonkulous" is a neologism coined by a TV series called *The O.C.*

The main character in that program employ the word quite often to refer to "things significantly more absurd than ridiculous to an almost impossible extreme; without possibility of serious consideration, or "fitted to excite absolute ridicule; intentionally crazy and silly; completely absurd and laughable" (explanation comes from <http://www.thatsredonkulous.com/about/>). Raj's word choice clashes with his usual style of language, but under the influence of alcohol, he becomes stimulated and uses words that are more colloquial and slang-like. Also, Penny is seen wearing a dark-colored dress, and Raj is not impressed by her outfit. He requests that Penny should wear something "redonkulous" with a flirtatious tone. The audience laughs

because the intoxicated Raj is different from the sober one. The difference of styles evokes laughter.

Penny is not too happy when she receives such a comment. She replies that this is all the “donkulous” Raj’s going to get. The non-existent word “donkulous” is a back-formation coinage. The neologism “redonkulous” is reanalyzed as “re + donkulous”; by omitting the prefix “re-,” the new word “donkulous” is coined. One cannot be sure what meaning and part of speech “donkulous” is, as this word is used as a noun in the context, but one can see that Penny is playing with the neologism of “redonkulous.” The audience can understand the playfulness, hence the laughter.

4.6 Reference point to nerds

Nerds are a social group that features positive and negative stereotypes. They are extremely smart people who usually work in science, computer and technology fields, but in many social situations, they are awkward, inept and anxious. Perhaps this is why their career choice are like this: science, computer and technology do not require human interactions as much as other professions do. They can focus on their interests and delve deeply into the issues and hobbies (i.e. usually sci-fi genre of works and comic books) they concern, but they do not like to spend too much time trying to do other things with people outside of their group. Based on these stereotypes that nerds have, the whole sitcom is built on such premise and for the first time, nerds are the

main characters in a sitcom. One should not take this show as a malevolent mocking of nerds because the positive stereotypes of nerds are also represented. For the first time, nerds are lovable characters that the audience can relate to, rather than just a comic relief.

Social groups exist by marking and emphasizing the differences between its members and non-members. In terms of nerds, language is very useful in distinguishing members or non-members. Since nerds are social underachievers, incongruity usually ensues when they have to interact with people outside of their group. Penny, the only female and the only non-nerd main character, serves as a reference point in the series. That Penny failing to show her allegiance with the four nerds can be seen as the greatest punchline in the series. Sometimes she does not understand what the nerds are talking about, and sometimes she refuses to get involved in their activity. Consider the following example:

Example 57 (from 317)

←TC 4→

Leonard: (searching in the box) Here's Spock's head with no body. Here's Mr. T's body with no head. Oh, yeah, here's Spock's body with Mr. T's head. **(laughter)** (with a lower register voice, pretending to be Mr. T) I pity the fool who's illogical. **(laughter)**

←TC 5→

=> Penny: Okay, I'm just gonna go home and make a grilled cheese and window-shop on eHarmony. **(laughter)**

=> Leonard: Okay, bye. **(laughter)**

=> Penny: Okay. (leaves)

Penny shows her non-allegiance to the four guys because they spend their time and money on a big box of sci-fi and comic book memorabilia, instead of buying dinner for themselves and Penny. Being hungry, Penny does not laugh at Leonard's imitation of Mr. T, but ironically tells his boyfriend Leonard that she is going to window shop on eHarmony. Leonard lets her leave without questioning why she wants to log on to an online dating website. This is an example where nerds and non-nerds are distinguished: nerds are so fanatic about sci-fi and comic books that they would rather spend their effort and money on them. For non-nerds, these things are unattractive and dinner should be the first priority. However, the four nerds are so excited about this box of memorabilia, they ignore Penny's hunger, so she explicates that she is going to leave. Also, Leonard is unaware that Penny is going to eHarmony shows that he does not know this is an online dating site. Since Leonard and Penny are in a romantic relationship, this is incongruous and the audience laughs at the implicature: that Penny is looking for a new man. The fact that Leonard lets her leave is another incongruity because one usually does not let his girlfriend log on a dating site to find a new mate, since she already has one. However, it is not surprised that a nerd does not know it is a dating site because nerds are thought to be social underachievers, and they usually do not engage in online dating. This kind of ignorance to popular culture and their love of sci-fi and comic book work together to

construct these characters as nerds, thus the humor in this example can be understood as a case of nerd-related humor.

When Penny is not around these nerds, there may be other minor characters that serve as a reference point to them. But in some scenes when there are only the guys around, at least one of them will become “less nerdy” and serve as the reference point to even nerdier people:

Example 58 (from 107)

←TC 18→

Scene: A Chinese restaurant.

Sheldon: I’m sorry, we cannot do this without Wolowitz.

=> Leonard: We can’t order Chinese food without Wolowitz?

Sheldon: Let me walk you through it, our standard is, the steamed dumpling appetizer, General Tso’s chicken, beef with broccoli, shrimp with lobster sauce and vegetable lo-main. Do you see the problem?

(laughter)

=> Leonard: I see A problem. **(laughter)**

Sheldon: Our entire order is predicated on four dumplings and four entrees divided among four people.

=> Leonard: So, we’ll just order three entrees.

Sheldon: Fine, what do you want to eliminate, and who gets the extra dumpling?

=> Raj: We could cut it into thirds.

Sheldon: Then it is no longer a dumpling, once you cut it open it is at best a very small open faced sandwich. **(laughter)**

In this TC, we see that Howard does not go to the Chinese restaurant with the three other guys. Sheldon is bothered by this fact and tries to prove that they cannot do without Howard. But the fact is most people do not get bothered by this fact, and that includes Leonard and Raj. The incongruity lies in the fact that Sheldon is overly

sensitive about insignificant things. A minor change in one's diet usually does not have serious consequences, yet Sheldon's eccentricity distances himself with Leonard and Raj, making him even nerdier than Leonard and Raj, who have already been considered as nerds. Inflexibility is usually seen as a stereotype of nerd, yet Sheldon's inflexibility seems to be more serious than Leonard and Raj.

For the sake of making reference points, sometimes the nerdy characters are not always as nerdy as they are supposed to be. In the following example, Raj is able to perceive or make use of verbal ironies.

Example 59 (from 314)

At the university cafeteria.

←TC 7→

Raj: (arriving) Hey, it's Disco Night at the Moonlight Roller Rink in Glendale tonight. Who's up for getting down? **(laughter)**

Howard: Oh, that's perfect. ←TC 8→ Bernadette's been hocking me to take her roller skating.

Leonard: I think Penny likes to skate. The four of us could double.

Howard: What could be better? We're in.

←sub-TC 7→

=> Raj: Great. It's not like I brought it up because I wanted to go. **(laughter)**

Howard: You can come with us=

=> Raj: =No, it's okay. I don't have to go. I'm happy just to guide you and your ladies to suitable entertainment choices. I'm a walking brown Yelp.com. **(laughter)**

Although considered as nerds, Raj employs irony correctly here, and Howard perceives Raj's irony without difficulty. Raj first negates the fact that he has made this suggestion and intends to go, but this is the fact that should not be negated when

he tries to make his point. This is a classic verbal irony: say the opposite of the intended meaning. Howard reads his intended meaning and offers him to come along, and Raj employs a second irony, claiming that he does not want to go, and that he is happy to provide information on where to date, because he is like a useful website. This self-degradation comes with a bitter overtone. It is, of course, an irony because the intended meaning is the complete opposite to the literal meaning. From this example, we can see that these characters are not ignorant to irony all the time. They are capable of producing and perceiving ironies in some social situations. Since *The Big Bang Theory* is a sitcom, not a biographic film nor a documentary on nerds, there are times when dramatic effects override the faithfulness of representing nerd qualities, but nevertheless, throughout the sitcom, unable to perceive irony is still a significant attribute of nerds.

So far, we can say that the mismatch of style in *The Big Bang Theory* is justified. Sometimes the nerdy characters stop being “nerds” for a while for the sake of finding a reference point for distinguishing nerdy and non-nerdy characters. Theoretically, since the language usage of nerds tend to be superstandard and of high formality, slang, expletives and popular culture (albeit non-sci-fi) references should be rare, if any. Since *The Big Bang Theory* is a sitcom broadcast in national television in the United States, some topics that are accessible to general public are sometimes

mentioned in the sitcom, perhaps in order to reach a wider audience. Consider the following example:

Example 60 (from 317)

←TC 25→

Leonard: You want to talk about endless patience? Penny made me watch all five seasons of *Sex and the City*.

=> Raj: There are six seasons, dude.

=> Leonard: Oh, crap! **(laughter)**

←sub-TC 25→

=> Raj: No, no, no, the sixth season is great. We go to Paris with Carrie and get our heart broken, and then Mr. Big shows up, we don't know if we can trust him again. **(laughter)** It's a wild ride. **(laughter)**

Leonard mentions that Penny made him watch *Sex and the City*, a popular comedy targeted mostly at female audience. Naturally, for sci-fi fans and nerds like Leonard, he is not likely to appreciate and enjoy this television series. However, being a nerd as well, Raj not only has the knowledge of how many seasons were made for *Sex and the City*, but also the knowledge of the content of the entire sixth season. He even shows his appreciation and shares his comments to the series. One can argue that this arrangement makes the Raj character somewhat ambivalent, but this is perhaps done for the sake of finding a reference point, and nerd-related humor would ensue. The goal of sitcom is to make audience laugh, and there are all kinds of incongruities in the script that serves as punchlines. Mismatch of styles can be seen as another

source of humor, but one can also regards it as a mechanism of finding a reference point so that nerd-related humor can be brought forth.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Study on language of humor traditionally examines the pragmatic mechanism of humor: violation of linguistic norms is one of the major sources of humor. However, sociolinguistic factor can be added into consideration in the construction of humor texts and scripts. In the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, the audience sees a specific social group, nerd, is brought to the center stage and is represented in performance. The main source of a particular social group comes from stereotypes, and in the case of nerds, they are characterized as people who are socially underachieved and intellectually overachieved. They are also people who are specifically fascinated about the segment of sci-fi genre of the popular culture. When shaping nerds as social underachievers, we mode them as lacking abilities of having adequate conversation with people who are not the member of their group. They are represented as people who have trouble adhere to social rituals, such as greeting, and this inability makes them difficult to make friends and socialize with people outside of their group. The function of the character of Penny is to reflect how socially inane nerds can be. Nerds are also represented as people who only process literal meaning in conversations, thus they are not good at following politeness principle, and humor ensues from their mishaps. They are also unable to process irony, implicature, and are

insensitive to contextual cues. To sum up, they are people with a high degree of social anxiety. In addition, they have no knowledge in mainstream popular culture, except for the sci-fi genre, they show their enthusiasm in sci-fi related films, games, comic books, etc., but remain quite ignorant to popular culture beyond this genre.

When shaping them as intellectual overachievers, we made them as possessing professional knowledge and applying them in every aspect of their life. They are characterized as people who speak superstandard language, namely written register across contexts. They tend to demonstrate much anecdotal knowledge, even when it is unnecessary to do so. They are also represented as multilingual, a significant sign of intellectual superiority in American society where most people are monolingual. They excel at computer and engineering, and spend much of their spare time with computers. These sociolinguistic factors contribute to the construction of nerds, and simultaneously provide sources of humor in *The Big Bang Theory*.

However, *The Big Bang Theory* also adheres to the pragmatic principles of humor in sitcom. Violations of linguistic norms are the methods of creating humor in *Friends*, and this principle is also applicable in *The Big Bang Theory*. Violations of linguistic norms take place at different levels, and they are done not only for the sake of humor, but also for indexing nerdiness of the characters. For the non-nerd characters in *The Big Bang Theory*, they also violate linguistic norms, but they lack

the quality of being socially underachieved and intellectually overachieved. Nerds tend to have a different pattern of violating linguistic norms compared to non-nerds. Non-nerds do not feel anxious in engaging social interactions. They adhere to social rituals, and they have the flexibility to respond to the change of context. Non-nerds violate politeness principles as well, but they do so for a purpose, be it insulting, threatening, condescending, begging, flattering, etc. However, nerds lack this flexibility, as they are represented as people who only put emphasis on literal meaning, regardless of the illocutionary act of an utterance. Similarly, emphasizing only on literal meaning makes nerds unable to process implicature and irony, nor are they aware that non-nerd people may take their words as irony when nerds do not have the intention to do so.

Lacking flexibility also makes nerds difficult to pay attention to the setting and the scene during interaction. Telling the same words to different people will lead to different interpretations, but in this sitcom, nerds often lack this kind of awareness, and when the undesirable results happen, the humor ensues as well.

Nerds are seen as people who lack knowledge on common popular culture. For non-nerds, information and knowledge of popular culture are considered to be a kind of basic knowledge, and possessing and sharing this knowledge engages an individual to the mainstream society. Nerds are represented in this sitcom as people who have

none, or insufficient knowledge of popular culture. Once one lacks the knowledge of the “mainstream,” one will be considered as a misfit and an outsider of the society, thus renders him/her a social underachiever. Another basic knowledge of the society is the taboo topics. What constitutes a taboo is specific to each society, and it requires enough degree of socialization to learn a taboo of a given society. In many cultures, sex, disease and death are considered as taboos. If one wants to talk about a taboo topic with someone else, one must consider the social relationship between him/her and his/her addressee, and pay attention to the setting and the scene so that the conversation would be appropriate and acceptable. Talking about taboo topics to the wrong people at the wrong time and place is inappropriate, and in a sitcom, it causes incongruity, and eventually the audience laughs. Nerds are represented as people who never learn how to appropriately talk about taboo topics, which makes them social underachievers because they do not share the common basic knowledge of the society.

Nevertheless, nerds have their strengths. They possess and demonstrate the knowledge of science. The methods to demonstrate their knowledge is through superstandard language, anecdotal knowledge, multilinguistic ability, and technology mastery. Under such social structures in which computer and technology are dominating our daily lives, possession of such knowledge is not only useful, but is

also admirable and potentially profitable. These are the symbolic capitals of nerds. Since they are always in want of common, shared knowledge of the society, which put them in an inferior position, it is necessary for them to demonstrate such intellectual to not be completely rejected by the society. Almost none of the non-nerd characters in this sitcom demonstrate such superior knowledge, but all the four nerds do so.

A significant trait of nerds is that they are fanatic about sci-fi genres of movies, television series, comic books, video games, etc. This can be seen as simultaneously being a social underachiever and an intellectual overachiever. The genre of sci-fi is approximate to their symbolic capital: the knowledge of science. One must have some level of knowledge and interest to science in order to appreciate sci-fi genre works. Since nerds possess an extreme amount of knowledge on science, sci-fi is easily accessible to them. Also, many sci-fi works have nothing to do with the society we live in, but usually features a fictitious time and place, with characters that possess superpowers that only exist in human imagination. Sci-fi is a tool of escapism for nerds. They are not popular in the society we live in, but for them, sci-fi is easily accessible and unreal, which is a perfect hobby to fulfill the characteristics of nerds. Other advantages of enjoying sci-fi genre works include that they do not require physical labor, in which nerds do not excel, and that these works demands engagement and attention, which is a forte of the nerds. All these reasons contribute to

the construction of the stereotype that nerds are sci-fi, comic book, and video games fans. By contrast, non-nerd characters in this sitcom show detachment and ignorance about sci-fi works.

Another issue is ethnicity. Nerd is a racialized and gendered stereotype in American society, according to Bucholtz (1998, 1999, 2001) and Eglash (2002). Caucasian males are thought to be quintessential nerds, but in this sitcom, Raj is a non-Caucasian foreigner who shares the property of a stereotypical nerd. To some extent, one can see that the script writers have broken a firm stereotype. One of the minor characters, Leslie Winkle, is a female scientist who shares some of the properties of nerd. However, she does not appear very often, thus the comparison between male and female nerds are not significant. In the last episode of season three, a new female nerd, Amy, joins the cast, but she also does not have enough screen time. From the last episode of season three, one can only say that the character of Amy bears strong resemblance to Sheldon in terms of behavioral patterns.

This study is only a starting point in the research of the sociolinguistic dimension of humor and the specific social group of nerd. One crucial thing is that *The Big Bang Theory* is not over yet, as more episodes are being produced. More examples will appear when future seasons of *The Big Bang Theory* are aired. As of February 2011, the production of this sitcom is guaranteed to the show's seventh season, and future

researchers can attain a complete data when the sitcom has run its course. Perhaps this can further proves the claim in this study, or it might overthrow it. Nevertheless, this sitcom is still worthwhile studying in many aspects. Comparison of humor strategy among sitcoms can also be studied as well. Since *The Big Bang Theory* is an American sitcom, it can be compared to sitcom, or similar genres of comedy shows, produced in other countries. The humor styles of different cultures can be a future research topic as well. To conclude, this thesis is only a starting point in the research of humorous language and the language and society.

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