

Research Project

The Pragmatics of Improvised Drama Comedy

Third-party funded project

Project title The Pragmatics of Improvised Drama Comedy

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Organisation / Research unit

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Department

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Status Active

This research project is situated within the field of pragmatics of fiction, which deals with communicative aspects of fictional texts. While the research area has attracted increasing interest in recent years, it has been restricted to scripted fictional texts, such as novels, scripted plays and films. Our aim is to expand the scope of the field by studying improvised theatre, an art form in which actors perform stories that are collectively improvised on the spot, usually based on suggestions by audience members. From a pragmatic point of view, improvised theatre is highly interesting because it is defined by two factors that set it apart from other types of fictional texts. First, the text is created while the audience is present; and second, it is created without any options for revisions. Thus, while the resulting texts have many similarities with scripted plays, the communicative framework in which they are produced includes two aspects that are more typical of spontaneous conversations than of scripted fiction. This presents exciting opportunities for studying the communicative aspects of fictional texts from a novel perspective and it promises to throw new light on how individual factors of the communicative framework influence text production.

The overall objective of the project is to study how the specifics of the communicative framework of improvised theatre affect the fictional text and its creation. More specifically, the project will focus on three topics that have already been investigated from a pragmatic perspective in scripted fictional texts, namely humour, characterisation and dialogues. These topics are studied by comparing improvised theatre to scripted fiction and to conversational interaction. Thus, the research questions of the project are:

- How does the way in which humour, characterisation, and dialogue are realised differ between scripted and improvised fictional texts?
- How are the observed differences related to the co-presence of the audience, especially the option to receive feedback from the audience during the process of creation?

The data for this research project will consist of a corpus of video material and transcriptions that will be compiled as part of the project. In addition to improvised theatre in English the corpus also includes scripted fiction from television series, which makes it possible to compare the two types of data. Additional data from existing corpora of conversational interaction will be used to compare the characteristics of dialogues in fictional texts to non-fictional spontaneous interaction. These data will be analysed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of pragmatic analysis in the tradition of pragmatics of fiction.

The results of the analysis will show that improvised theatre shares characteristics with both scripted fiction and with conversational interaction. By studying specific features across different settings, it will become apparent how both the fictional nature of a text and its degree of composition influence its form. In this way, the insights gained from studying improvised theatre will bridge the gap between research on scripted fictional texts and research on spontaneous interaction, showing that there are more similarities and continuities between these sets of data than previously thought.

The findings of this project will make an important contribution to the field of pragmatics, especially the pragmatics of fiction, since they will provide information on the role of two specific factors of the communicative framework of fictional texts that have not been studied in isolation so far. The results will help differentiate between text characteristics that are related to the fictional nature of the text and characteristics that are related to the conditions under which the text is created. In a wider perspective, the results of the project contribute to a better understanding of how text production is influenced by the communicative framework in general and, more specifically, by individual factors like fictionality, interaction, spontaneity and immediacy. In addition, the project will also contribute to neighbouring fields, such as literary stylistics, improvisation studies and theatre and performance studies.

Keywords Pragmatics, Pragmatics of Fiction, Humour, Improvisation Studies, Literary Stylistics, Participation Framework, Fictional Dialogues, Characterisation, Spontaneity, Conversation Analysis, Spoken Language

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