Vague Languages Implied through Disparagement Functions in Comic Strips

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ABSTRACT

Vague language is used by speakers for many purposes. When a speaker wants to give some criticism, refusal, or deliver messages that might be unpleasant for the hearer, vague language will be one of the appropriate ways to go about it. Humor is considered the 'smooth' way to deliver messages that might hurt the hearer. One of the interesting forms of media toanalyse, that consistsof humor, are comic strips. However, the study on the useof vague language in comic strips is still rare. This study discusses the analysis ofvague language using Raskin's disparagement theory of humor (1985), Grice's Cooperative Principle and Conversational Implicature (1975). This research proposes to find out: 1) What expressions are considered as vague language in comic strips? 2) How does vague language create the humorous effects of the jokes?; and 3) How is vague language related to the disparagement functions of the jokes? It is a qualitative research, which is descriptive, involving process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures (Creswell 1994). The method used is a case-study in which the data was taken from The Born Loser comic strips. The result findings show that vague language is usually reflected at the last line of the joke. Vague language creates the humorous effect of the joke by flouting the maxims and it is related to the disparagement functions based on Raskin's theory of humor (1985) by drawing the conversational implicature. The disparagement in comic strips serves the followingfunctions; 1) to show hostility and agression, 2) to show malice and derison and 3) to show superiority.

Keywords: disparagement; vague language; comic strips; cooperative principles; conversational implicature

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a popular concept that has been offered as a cure-all for most of society's ill. It is almost impossible to pick up a newspaper, or even take part in a conversation, without hearing the word communication (Trenholm 1991). Every problem, personal or public, serious or trivial, has become a problem of communication, and everything we do, intentionally or not, is thought to communicate some hidden meaning (Trenholm 1991). Hidden meaning is usually contained in our daily conversation when we communicate with other people. Deliberately or not, sometimes we use jokes to cover hidden messages in our conversation. Hidden messages are different from lies. Deception is not an infrequent part of human communication since people are reportedly said to be telling one to two lies per day on average (Tan et al. 2017). However, to imply something is not the same as to lie. People imply something with the consideration that the message of the conversation would be understood without it being clearly stated.

Hidden messages deal with vague language. It is interesting to analyze how vague language is reflected in comic strips and how it is related to the disparagement theory of humor proposed by Raskin (1985). The reason why analysing comic strips is interesting is because comic strips could be analysed from various perspectives, such as pragmatics, semantics, semiotics, sociolinguistics and other fields of study. One important perspective that can be studied is vague language. Vagueness is one of the basic properties of natural language (Cao Wei 2007).Vague language is a common linguistic phenomenon in comic strips published in daily newspaper. Study of vague language in comic strips is relatively sparse, and this article will discuss vague language in comic strips related to Raskin's disparagement theory of humor (1985), Grice's Cooperation Principle and Conversational Implicature (1975).

Comic strips are often published in newspapers. It has additional purpose to entertain readers even within hot issues in politics, businesses, crimes and so on. Vague languages are reflected in statements or expressions in comic strips to create a humorous effect in the story. The messsage of the joke could be successfully delivered when readers burst into laughter after they read it. When readers uncover the implicature of the joke, it means they also get the message delivered by the author.

Most jokes work by disparagement of others, especially those who are our enemies. Plato maintains that malice or envy is at the root of comic enjoyment and that we laugh at the misfortunes of other for joy that we do not share with them (Raskin 1985). Furthermore, the study may offer the readers certain knowledge about vague language reflected in comic strips and how it disparages others and what the author expects the readers to implicate from the jokes.

This research is worth doing since disparagement in comic strips is rarely taken as a data source in the pragmatic research field. The disparagement and vague languages appear in most of comic strips which is interesting to be explored more in language research. Unfortunately, the research in this field, especially from a linguistic point of view, is still sparse. Therefore the writer is interested to analyze this topic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

COMIC STRIPS

Jokes are created in various ways. One of them is comic strips.According to Lee et al. (2017) comics are are easily recognizable. Often found in newspapers, comic strips provide light reading and entertainment. Dukut (2001) explains that a comic strip is one of the types of cartoon told by means of a series of drawings arranged in horizontal lines, or strips, or rectangles called 'panels' and read like a text from left to right. The term is applied specifically to comics found in newspapers. Characteristically, it usually depicts the adventures of one or more characters in a limited time sequence. The dialogue in the panel is called 'a balloon', which is issued from the mouth or head of the characters whose turn it is to speak or think (Dukut 2001).

HUMOUR THEORIES

Raskin (1985) groups the theories of humour into three large classes: *cognitive-perceptual, social-behavioral,* and *psycho-analytical*. The first class is associated with incongruity; the second one with disparagement, the third with suppression or repression. Raskinalso explains that the incongruity-based theories make a statement about the stimulus; the superiority theories characterize the relations or attitudes between the speaker and the hearer; while the

release/relief theories comment on the feelings and psychology of the hearer only. This study will focus on the second class of theory, namely disparagement-based theory of humour. This approach is based on *hostility, superiority, malice, aggression, derision,* or *disparagement*.

Many researchers who have followed this line of analysis consider themselves followers of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbesas quoted in Raskin (1985) claims that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour (Raskin 1985). Based on the quotation, it is clear that disparagement-based theory of humor is based on the observation that we laugh at other people's infirmities, especially those who are our enemies.

VAGUE LANGUAGE

In comic strips, the characters often speak using vague languages. There are some people who had already worked on the analysis of vagueness, such as; Yen Liang Lin (2013) and Zhu Wunzhong and Li Jingyi (2013). The former analyzed vague language and interpersonal communication of adolescent intercultural conversation. Yen Liang Lin's research findings demostrated the pedagogical merit of the analysis of naturally-occurring discourse and it helped in the design of English courses for adolescent intercultural interaction (Lin 2013). The latter also analysed the functions of vague language in commercial advertising. Zhu Wunzhong and Li Jingyi (2013) found that vague language in commercial advertising played both positive and negative roles. Its positive functions included improving the flexibility of communication, enhancing the persuasiveness of communication and ensuring the accuracy of information whereas its negative functions covered misleading readers and making them subject to false understandings (Zhu Wenzhong 2013). In society, people do not always or even usually say what they mean. Speakers frequently mean much more than their words actually say (Thomas 1995). It is in the area of linguistics known as pragmatics. Pragmatics deals with hidden messages (Wray 1998). Hidden message deals with vagueness.

What is vague language? Some experts define vague language, as follows:

> Pierce, as cited in Channell, says that "a proposition is vague where there are possible states of things concerning which it is intrinsically uncertain whether, had they been contemplated by the speaker, he would have regarded them as excluded or allowed by the proposition..." (Channell 2000). According to Pierce, a vagueness could be uttered by a speaker when he could not decide whether certain facts as evidences are excluded or allowed.

Carter and McCarthy, as cited in Cutting say that "Vague language is defined as words or phrases "which deliberately refer to people and things in a non-specific, imprecise way" (Cutting 2007). From Carter and Mccarthy's point of view, vague language is related to lexical level, since vague language means words or phares that are imprecise.

Channell, as cited in Cutting argues that "An expression is vague if (a) it can be contrasted with another word or expression which appears to render the same proposition, (b) it is purposely and unabashedly vague or (c) the meaning arises from intrinsic uncertainty" (Cutting 2007). Channel argues that vagueness occurs under one of the circumstances in which an expression purposely and unabashedly is made vague.

According to (Trappes-Lomax 2007) "vague language must be purposive, but it need not be unabashedly vague since disguising a vague intent may be a self-protective device (Cutting 2007). In Trappes-Lomax's opinion "any choice of language that has purposes to make a reference or situation less described than it might have been is categorized into vague language.

From the explanations above, vague language is not clearly defined yet. Many experts have defined what vague language is in their own varying ways. For this research, the writer agrees with Trappes-Lomax's opinion that any choice of language that has purposes to make a reference or a situation less described than it might have been will be the definition of vague language. This is in line with Grice's theory of flouting the maxims. In flouting the maxims, the speaker leaves the hidden message or implicature to be understood by the listener or readers for certain purposes. Therefore, any language or situation that is not described clearly and appropriately may be categorized into vagueness.

COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES AND MAXIMS

From numerous statements above concerning the definition of vague language, we can assume that the vagueness is closely related to the cooperative principles that is proposed by (Grice 1975) which he considers to underly successful verbal communication. The co-operative principle states: "make your conversational contribution such as required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. To this he appends four maxims, which clarify how the co-operative principle works (Black 2006). The First is called **Maxim of Quantity** in which the contribution must be given as informative as is required and it is not allowed to make our contribution more informative than is required. The second is called **Maxim of Quality**. According to the rules of this maxim, we must not say what we believe to be false and we must not say anything for which we lack adequate evidence of. The third maxim is called **Maxim of Relation**. Be relevant to answer what is questioned as one of the examples that we observe in the maxim of relation. The fourth maxim is called **Maxim of Manner**. According to the rules in the maxim of manner, we demand to avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, to be brief and to be orderly.

It seems likely that we (unconsciously) use one or more of the co-operative principles to interpret a discourse. Black says that different societies may interpret the maxims differently: there is bound to be cross-cultural variation (Black 2006)
According to (Raskin 1985) the maxims on which the cooperative principle for joke telling is different. They are as follows:

Maxim of Quantity:
Give exactly as much information as is necessary for the joke.
Maxim of Quality:
Say what is compatible with the world of the joke.
Maxim Relation:
Say what is relevant to the joke.
Maxim of Manner:
Tell the joke efficiently.

In accordance with this new cooperative principle, the hearer does not expect the speaker to tell the truth or to convey him any relevant information. Rather, he perceives the intention of the speaker as an attempt to make him, the hearer laughs. As a result, the hearer will look for the implicature of the joke. It is in line with Grundy's opinion that jokes typically work by allowing the audience to derive an implicature and then denying that this is a meaning the joke-teller intended to convey (Grundy 2000).

CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES

Conversational implicatures arise from a combination of language and situation: the same utterance on different occasions might not generate an implicature, or might suggest a different one. They depend on the situation in which they occur, and must be interpreted

taking the context into account (Black 2006). Mey (2001) defines a conversational implicature as something, which is implied in conversation andthat is left implicit in actual use. He explains further that conversational implicature concerns the way we understand an utterance in conversation in accordance with what we expect to hear. According to Grice in Grundy (2000), conversational implicature covers any meaning that is implied, for instance,a meaning that is conveyed indirectly or through hintsand understood implicitly without ever being explicitly stated. Another research related to implicature is from Vivanco (2006). She analysed the differences between English and Spanish in technical advertising texts in relation to the concepts of implicature and explicature.

Based on the literature review explained above, the writer comes to the conclusion that vague language could appear in any media, such as advertisement, news, and comic strips.

DISPARAGEMENT HUMOUR

There were many previous studies done on disparagement humour. Most of the studies analysed humor from the psychological point of view, such as the studies done by Gregory R. Maio, James M. Olson and Jackie Bush (1997) and Ferguson and Ford (2008). Ferguson and Ford (2008), also did experiment to test whether or not reciting disparaging humor about a disadvantaged group affects joke tellers' stereotypes of the group. In the experiment, they manipulated whether participants recited humor that disparaged Newfoundlanders, who are a relatively disadvantaged group in Canada, or recited non-disparaging humor. Their results indicated that participants who recited disparaging humor subsequently reported more negative stereotypes of Newfoundlanders than did participants who recited non-disparaging humor (Maio 1997). The latter reviewed the empirical and theoretical literature on disparagement humor and amusement. In particular, they asked "Why is disparagement humor funny?" and their research provided the answer through psychoanalytic theory, superiority theories, and social identity theories. Each framework suggested a distinct psychological mechanism that fosters amusement upon exposure to disparagement humor (Ferguson 2008). Another research is from Nor Azikin Mohd Omar and Jariah Mohd Jan who investigated humour at work. They said that humour primarily acts as a channel of solidarity when it functions through friendly teasing and boundary marking, highlighting similarities or shared knowledge and disclosing of personal stories to the team member (2013). Humor in comic strips which is published in newspaper is still rarely used as media of analysis, especially from the pragmatic point of view. What makes this study different from the previous ones is the media used, comic strips, in the case of this study where comic strips are taken as the data source. The other gap that is filled by the writer in this research is in the theories. In this case, the writer analyses how disparagement functions is reflected through vague language in the comic strips from a pragmatic point of view. Linguistically, the result of this study could contribute to pragmatic study.

This study discusses how vague language reflects in comic strips related to disparagement functions based on Raskin's theory of humor. Therefore the following questions are discussed in this article:

(1)   What expressions are considered as vague language in comic strips?
(2)   How does vague language create the humorous effects of the jokes?; and
(3)   How is vague language related to disparagement functions of the jokes?

METHODOLOGY

The present study is qualitative. Qualitative research is descriptivein that the researcher is interested in the process, meaning, and understanding gained through words or pictures (Cresswell 1994).The examples in this article are for the purposes of analyzing the vague language in comic strips related to disparagement functions. The examples of analysis are taken from an English-language newspaper "The Jakarta Post". It is a daily newspaper published in Indonesia. The data of the research is from a comic strip entitled 'The Born Loser', created by Art and Chip Sansom. In 'The Born Loser' comic strip, readers will be taken to the real situation in which all of the characters are humans. Taking a look at the title, we might wonder who the born loser is. The born loser in this comic is Brutus Thornapple, an ordinary man, a husband and a father. His wife, Gladys, seems to be dominant in everything. They have a son, named Wilberforce. Brutus' mother in-law, Ramona Gargle, does not like him. Brutus works in a company led by a stingy boss, Rancid Veeblefester. Besides, Brutus also has a mischievous neighbor, Hurricane Hattie O'Hara. All of the data was analysed using Grice's theory of cooperative principle and maxims (1975) and Raskin's theory of humor (1985).

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

In eliciting the subjective interpretation of the comic strips, this paper uses Grice's theory of maxims (1975), conversational implicature (Mey, 2001) and Raskin's disparagement theory of humour.

i.   To find out the expression of vague language, the researcher looks for and observes the punch line of the joke that is often placed at the last part of the comic strip.

ii. To describe how vague language creates the humorous effect of the jokes, the researcher analyses the dialogues in the comic strips using Grice's theory of maxims, namely the: maxim of quality, maxim of quantity, maxim of relation and maxim of manner

iii. To describe how vague language is related to the disparagement functions of the jokes, the researcher analyses the data using Raskin's disparagement theory of humour. The disparagement in comic strips are then classified and described into the following functions; to show hostility and aggression, to show malice and derision and to show superiority.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis below was done using Grice's theory of flouting the maxims and conversational implicatures (1975) which is related to Raskin's disparagement-based theory of humor (1985).

Vague language in comic strips is used to show hostility, superiority, aggression, and malice indirectly with many purposes. The following discussions show each disparagement function as proposed by Hobbes as quoted in Raskin(1985).

1.   To Show Hostility and Aggression
The following example was taken from The Jakarta Post newspaper, edition February 27, 2009:

The example shows the conversation between Brutus Thornapple **(B)** and his boss at office, Rancid Veeblefester **(A).** The vagueness of the joke is reflected at the last sentence of the joke – *"I just got a rise"*. Readers may read the dialogue twice or even more why **B** says it. It is a contradictive sentence since at the previous sentence, **B** says something about his annual salary break. To understand more about what **B** actually means, readers should draw an implicature.

What might provoke readers' laughter arises from the implicature of the joke. It could create such an implicature since the sentence also flouts the maxims. **B**'s last sentence flouts the maxim of manner since his last sentence about the raise is unclear. How come that the break down of his salary comes into a raise. The implicature arises from **B**'s last sentence is **A** always break **B**'s salary down per day annually. By saying the last sentence, **B** implicates that he still get benefits even if **A** will break down his annual salary this year.

Based on Raskin's disparagement theory of humor, the dialogue above shows hostility and agression since the first sentence. The words *"like a cheshire cat"* uttered by **A** has already shown that there is a hostility between both of them. The utterance also shows a kind of agression to **B**.

And **B'**s answer is also a kind of agression about what his boss usually does to **B**'s annual salary. Therefore **B** wants to harass his boss by saying that he got a raise.

2.   To Show Malice and Derision

The following example was taken from The Jakarta Post newspaper, edition December 15, 2008:

The conversation takes place at Brutus Thornapple's home. At that time, Brutus **(A)** is watching TV with his wife, Gladys **(B).** The expression that is considered most vague is the last sentence uttered by Gladys (**B**): *"to get a pencil and some paper to make the list."* **B'**s sentence is vague since it does not answer **A**'s question about where **B** is going. **B**'s last sentence flouts the maxim of quality since **B** does not answer properly **A'**s question. Instead of giving a direct answer where **B** is going, **B** gives another statement that she will get a pencil and some paper to make the list. The readers might get confused what kind of list and what the list is for? Vagueness creates readers' confusion.

It could take a few seconds before the readers get the implicature of what **B** is saying. Readers may soon understand what is actually meant by **B.** The implicature of the last sentence of the joke means that Brutus is not as sexy as Hugh Jackman. Gladys **(B)** thinks that Hugh Jackman deserves to be the sexiest man alive, while her husband – Brutus **(A)** is not Jackman's rival at all because Jackman's level as the sexiest man alive is much higher than Brutus'. Jackman is a famous actor while Brutus is just an ordinary man. The last phrase of the last sentence – *'....to make the list'* implicates that there are a lot of things that **B** could write to make a list that **A** is not sexy at all and what **A** has not got therefore **A** cannot be compared to Hugh Jackman. Soon readers will understand the implicature of the joke, they will laugh.

From **B'**s utterance at the last line of the joke, readers may assume that **B** disparages **A.** The disparagement function in this case is to show derision. Derision is closely related to malice, therefore, we may conclude that when someone shows derision it means also he shows malice.

Another similar example is as follow:

(The following example was taken from The Jakarta Post newspaper, edition October 16, 2008):

The data shows the conversation between Brutus (**A**) and his mother-in law, Ramona Gargle (**B**). Brutus is telling something to his mother in-law. In the middle of their conversation, mother Gargle is yawning. When Brutus asks her whether his conversation bores her, mother Gargle does not answer Brutus'question directly. Her answer is categorized into vague language. The sentence "*...if you were on TV, I'd be reaching for the remote"*. Her answer might slow down readers'comprehension. Instead of talking about boredom asked by Brutus, mother Gargle is talking about TV and remote. Readers will try to find the correlation between Brutus' question and mother Gargle's answer. The last sentence of the joke flouts the maxim of quality since mother Gargle does not directly answer Brutus' question simply by saying 'yes' or 'no'. Instead she makes an analogy in order to leave an implicit meaning to be understood by Brutus.

The analogy created by mother Gargle makes Brutus and also readers wonder why she would reach for the remote? What is the remote for? People will reach for the remote to do the following things; (1) to change the channel of the TV station and or (2) to turn off the television. Both implications reflect that the program on TV that is currently being watched is not interesting. The implicature of mother Gargle's last sentence of the joke is that Brutus conversation really bores her.

It is obvious that mother Gargles's utterance disparages Brutus. The disparagement function reflected by mother Gargle's utterance is to show malice and derision. Since mother Gargle does not like Brutus, she implements her malice through derision in her utterances. In mother Gargle's point of view, Brutus is always wrong. Whatever is done by Brutus is not interesting at all.

3. *To Show Superiority*
The following example was taken from The Jakarta Post newspaper, edition October 4, 2008:


THE BORN LOSER

The example is a conversation between Brutus **(A)** and his wife, Gladys **(B).** They were quarrelling but Brutus cannot say anything while Gladys keeps on scolding her husband. Therefore Brutus tries to interrupt his wife by saying *"Stop! Can't I get a word in edgewise with you?*. What is considered vague in the example above is Gladys's answer *"Well, that was just ten words you got in!"* For a moment, Gladys's sentence above will take readers into the vagueness since readers will think which of Brutus's ten words were meant by Gladys? Brutus just said one sentence already.

The clues which provoke laughter in the example above are:*a word* (said by Brutus) and *ten words* (said by Gladys). The readers may count that there are ten words spoken by Brutus (**A**) at the first line of the joke. Brutus' utterance actually means he wants to interrupt Gladys, not literally asking only one word. Gladys, then, counts words spoken by Brutus and says that he has already spoken in ten words – more than he asks. The implicature arises here is that Gladys does not want to be interrupted nor she gives any chance to her husband to explain anything. Gladys' answer at the second line of the joke flouts the maxim of relation since her answer is not relevant to what is actually being asked by her husband, Brutus. In this case, Brutus wants Gladys to give him a chance to speak, but Gladys does not give the chance at all.

From the example above, readers could see that Gladys treats her husband – Brutus, like her employee. Gladys is his boss.Gladys forces Brutus to listen to what she says and he has no chance to explain anything. The disparagement function of this joke is to show superiority. The wife is superior, in this case, while her husband is her subordinate or inferior who should obey the superior.

From the analysis explained at the previous session, the writer unearthed new findings. Raskin said that disparagement-based theory of humor is based on hostility, agression, malice, derision and superiority. Based on the analyzed data, the writer found that when one of the characters produces utterances that show hostility, at the same time, the character also shows agression,the two could not be separated. When one of the characters uttered words that are categorized into malice, the character uttered derision as well. On the other hand, showing superiority is not always followed by aggression or derision. It could stand independently. An interesting finding is actually found in the following example:

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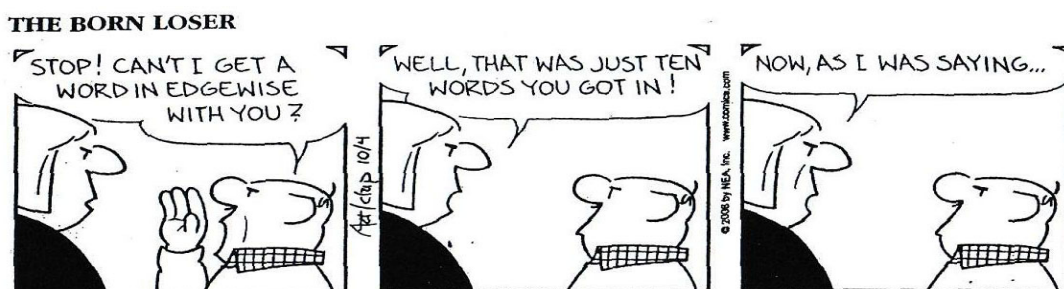
As what is explained in the previous session, the function of the disparagement in the example is to show superiority. At a glance, B's utterances (Gladys') may lead the readers to the following implicatures:

a.   **A (**Brutus) talked too much to **B** (Gladys)
b.   **B** (Gladys) did not want to be interrupted

If we observe it further, **B**'s utterances show agression implicitly. When **B** said that *"Well, that was just ten words you got in!"* It has the implicature that **B** asked **A**(Brutus) not to continue his words. **B**bullied**A**into silence and to listen to what she was going to say. Therefore option (b) in the list of implicatures above is the most appropriate one to describe **B**'s hidden meaning. **B** did not want to be interrupted by **A**, therefore she did notgive any chance for A to speak at all.In this case, superiority is not the only thing shown in **B**'s utterances, aggression is also shown. When **B** showed her superiority, at the same time, she also attacked her partner.

CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysed, the vague language is often placed at the last part of the comic strips. It is in the form of the last utterance of the last character appearing in the comic strips. The researcher found comic strips that flouted not only one maxim but in fact there were some which flouted two maxims and even more than two maxims at once. The disparagement functions of the comic strips are based on hostility, aggression, malice, derision, and superiority. Based on the data analysed, the disparagement in comic strips served the following functions; 1) to show hostility and aggression, 2) to show malice and derision and 3) to show superiority.

Disparagement humor has appeared repeatedly in all forms of mass media (Ferguson 2008). It facilitates hostile and discriminatory environments for others (Ford 2000). Disparagement humor from the pragmatic point of view related to the conversational implicature that readers are expected to draw on. From various implicatures, readers will contextually choose the most appropriate one. It deals with hidden meanings which are implied though vague language. The punch line of the joke is at the last line of the comic strip.The humorous effect of the joke is created through flouting the maxims and conversational implicatures that should be understood by readers. As soon as readers get why the jokes flout the maxim and what the conversational implicature is, they will get the answer of what being funny is in the comic strips.

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