

Max Nicholai Tesla, Indah Wahyuningsih, Sabta Diana – The Disclosure of Dark Humor and Comedic Sociopathy through Incongruities Made by the Villain the Joker in the Dark Knight Movie

## THE DISCLOSURE OF DARK HUMOR AND COMEDIC SOCIOPATHY THROUGH INCONGRUITIES MADE BY THE VILLAIN THE JOKER IN THE DARK KNIGHT MOVIE

**Max Nicholai Tesla**

Universitas Jember, Jember, Indonesia  
Email: tesla29united@gmail.com

**Indah Wahyuningsih**

Universitas Jember, Jember, Indonesia  
Email: indah.wahyuningsih@unej.com

**Sabta Diana**

Universitas Jember, Jember, Indonesia  
Email: sabta.diana@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines dark jokes and how they are delivered through implications made by a character named The Joker under the scope of Pragmatics in Incongruity Theory by Morreall (1987), and Attardo (1994). This study is also supported by some other theories such as Gricean Maxim by Grice (1989) and Conversational Implicature by Levinson (1983). The study is a descriptive-qualitative research with case study as the strategy. The data are obtained using documentary method by watching the movie The Dark Knight and selecting utterances made by The Joker that contain dark jokes. The findings of the study show that The Joker has many ways of delivering his dark joke as a display of his sociopathic character. The incongruities and the maxims he flouts vary, although there is dominance in ignorance type of incongruity and the flouting of maxim of quality. The reasons why The Joker makes dark jokes are because he enjoys the misfortunes of others and he sees them as entertainment as a sociopath that he is; he wants to shift the threats pointed to him and uses the jokes as the way for him to threaten his enemies back; and because he want to maintain unpredictability of his evil deeds by telling jokes with a dark twist at the end, just before he commits acts of crime. He uses a lot of implicatures to confuse his opponents and to keep them from understanding the way The Joker thinks and acts.*

**Keywords:** dark joke; incongruity theory; Gricean maxim; conversational implicature

**INTRODUCTION**

Humor is a common form of interaction. According to Paolo (1980), humor has two ingredients, incongruity and appropriate emotional climate. It comes in various forms, like satire, situational, slapstick, wordplay, and sarcasm. Jokes in their various forms represent a genre which we regularly encounter in everyday life (Schwarz, 2010) and they have three different components. The first is the build-up, which forms the body of the joke (introduces the joke). Next is the pivot. It signifies the word or phrase around which the ambiguity is created. The last one is the punch line, which serves to conclude the joke and often introduces the conflicting point of view or a new scene entirely (Norrick (1989), mentioned in Schwarz (2010).

Of many types of jokes that exist, there is one type of humor in particular, called 'dark humor' or 'black comedy'. It is a sub-genre of comedy and satire where topics and events that are usually treated seriously are treated in a satirical manner while still being portrayed as the negative events that they are. Typical targets are death, (mass) murder, suicide, blackmail, (domestic) violence, disease, insanity, handicaps, environmental disasters, famine, fear, child pornography/abuse, drug abuse, rape, castration, cannibalism, war, terrorism, racism, sexism, homophobia, bestiality and line-cutting (TV Tropes, Nn, 2010). Furthermore, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica (2016), black humor often uses farce and low comedy to make clear that individuals are helpless victims of fate and character. This kind of humor will relate to psychological and social aspects of comedy, resulting in comedic sociopathy. A sociopath, as written in Hirstein (2013), is a term used to describe someone who has moral depravity or moral insanity. Nowadays though, sociopaths are seen more as the product of their environment, and their upbringing. Comedy, according to TV Tropes (Nn, 2010) is not pretty; because most of the time, the character does not particularly merit sympathy. We often find people laugh on others' misery in comedy, which shows that comedy could relate to sociopathy.

This research would like to discuss an iconic sociopathic villainous character that is one of the main villains in the Batman comics and series. Batman, who is the alter ego of Bruce Wayne, is a character that was made to become the world's greatest weapon against crime, due to Bruce's terrible past: losing his parents at a very young age because of crime. Batman is the most feared superhero of all, because he's pushed himself to the absolute pinnacle of human achievement. He's a brilliant detective who's mastered fighting techniques the world's barely heard of. An Olympic-caliber athlete with a plan for every occasion, Batman's seemingly always five steps ahead of his foes (dccomics.com). However, he does have an arch nemesis, named The Joker. Depicted as a sociopathic clown, with a past as dark as Batman, we can sense the comedic sense in the character, as clowns are often seen as entertainers; a stereotype which has lasted for many decades. However, as a sociopath and as a villain, he also has that evil nature in him. Therefore, the jokes delivered by the Joker are almost definitely, dark ones. Arguably though, some people might not see the jokes as humor and instead just consider them as sadistic and lunatic utterances, yet, since they fulfill the two ingredients of a humor, they are still considered as jokes. One of the most iconic The Joker appearances is pictured in a 2008 movie 'The Dark Knight' by Christopher Nolan as the second part of 'The Dark Knight' trilogy, portrayed by Heath Ledger. It is one of the highest rated superhero movies and a blockbuster, with a rating of 9.0/10 from the famous movie review panel, Rotten Tomatoes. The movie also won two awards; one of those is "Best Supporting Actor" for Heath Ledger, who successfully portrayed The Joker in his own way but did not completely stray from the character's persona (wikipedia.org). [previously related studies]

Furthermore, this study aims to answer a couple of questions; first, how does The Joker deliver the incongruity of sociopathic jokes in the movie?, second, what are the meanings behind The Joker's implicit jokes?, and third, why does The Joker use implicatures in his deliveries of dark comedy?.

## THEORY AND METHOD

This research will look into humor delivered by The Joker thoroughly, using one of three humor theories that have been established throughout the years by experts. These theories define the origins of humor; the hows and whys of humor-making. The theories are relief theory by Sigmund Freud (1905) and incongruity theory by Kant and Schopenhauer (1819), followed by Morreall (1987), and Attardo (1994). Furthermore, the research will also attempt to expose the character's sense of humor in relation with his role as the antagonist in the movie. In addition, this research also would like to display the ways that humor, even the implicit ones, can be explained for further researches using theories of pragmatics, such as Gricean Maxim and Conversational Implicature by Levinson and Grice.

The type of research that the writer adopts is descriptive-qualitative. This type is required because the data are not numerical data and require a constant observation on the object of research that is the jokes delivered by the villainous character The Joker in the movie 'The Dark Knight'. This research is descriptive because the writer attempts to describe the jokes delivered by The Joker in the movie based on theories that support it. Furthermore, it is a qualitative research because it requires a detailed and constant observation of the jokes uttered by The Joker which are aligned with the incongruity theory; or in other words, jokes that are contextual (based on a particular context and situation). These data come in the form of sentences, phrases, or expressions.

The strategy applied on this research is case study. This strategy is suitable for this research because it does not require survey that requires a wide range of instances; it only focuses on dark humor produced by The Joker and to dig deep into it in order to discover more details about how it is constructed and applied. Furthermore, case study is also the most appropriate approach because it seeks the relationships that occur in social life. In this research, the relationship is between the productions of dark humor in relation to sociopathy

which could explain the motive of the joke deliveries. The interrelation will then be described thoroughly to provide the outcome.

The source of data of this research is a movie released in 2008 entitled 'The Dark Knight'. It is an action movie about the superhero, Batman, who faces his archenemy, The Joker, and several other rogues. The movie is 152 minutes long, and it will be obtained via download on a website named <https://indox1.net/>. The data are collected using documentary method. From the movie, there are 22 (written) utterances made by The Joker and they are combined by actions as well (in the form of written caption) to make more sense of the context.

Although there are many characters in the movie, only The Joker's implicatures will be used as the data of this research. Of course, pieces of dialogues with the other characters will be included as the context builder, but they will only act as the means to relate the implicatures to the moment of speaking. Therefore, purposive sampling is required. The sampling required in this research is to sort out the Joker's utterances in the movie. Moreover, the utterances that will be used are only those indicating incongruity and maxim flouting. All of the findings will be the product of this sampling and they are factual findings.

In working with the data, some steps are required. First, The acquired data are re-evaluated using the basis of Levinson's Conversational Implicature theory. Second, the implicatures are sorted to seek for ones intended to create humor based on the context of the conversation which precedes the implicatures. In order to complete this phase, Incongruity theory mentioned by Morreall (1987) and Attardo (1994) is required as the foundation of the classification.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Findings

Examples of analysis:

**Extract 1. (Minute 05:30)**

**The scene takes place at a bank where The Joker and his crew are committing a robbery.**

**Bank manager** : “Criminals in this town used to believe in things. Honor. Respect. Look at you. What do you believe in huh? What do you believe i-“

**\*The Joker puts a grenade into the man’s mouth\***

**The Joker** : “I believe whatever doesn’t kill you... simply makes you stranger.” \*grins\*

**\*The Joker walks towards a bus, with a thread attached to the grenade from his jacket. He gets on the bus, and shuts the door, trapping the thread\***

In that utterance, The Joker answers the bank manager’s question by making wordplay of the saying ‘what does not kill you makes you stronger’ with the word ‘stranger’ replacing ‘stronger’. By performing this wordplay, one type of incongruity, ignorance, can be found from this utterance because he ignores the knowledge that he has about the saying ‘what does not kill you makes you stronger’ and makes a pun out of it, or deviates it on purpose with the word ‘stronger’. Furthermore, the maxims that he flouted are the maxim of quality and maxim of relation, because what he says is not how the saying is supposed to be, therefore the information given is not authentic. The Joker has the knowledge about the actual saying; that means he is fooling his own knowledge in that utterance thus making it a flouting action of the maxim of quality. The reason why The Joker also flouts the maxim of relation is because the bank manager actually questions The Joker’s lack of motivation and reason in his criminal acts unlike other criminals in the past. When asked about it, however, The Joker responds with his personal belief based on what he experienced instead of an agenda. The purpose of the dark joke is to deflect the mocking from the manager and to initiate his sadistic act with a dark joke in relation to tragedies (“whatever doesn’t kill you”) and how it can impact on humans in a negative way (“makes you stranger”) to implicitly emphasize The Joker’s own irregularity.

**Extract 2. (Minute 23:10)**

**A gang of mobs discusses some dealings at a pantry, The Joker suddenly appears.**

**The Joker** : “Hahaha..haha.ha. And I thought my jokes were bad” .

**Gambol** : “Give me one reason why I shouldn’t have my boy here pull your head off.”

**The Joker** : “Hahaha..haha.ha. And I thought my jokes were bad” .

**Gambol** : “How about a magic trick?” \*slams a pencil on the table upright\* “I’m gonna make this pencil disappear”

**\*A bodyguard moves at The Joker, but he docks, grips the bodyguard’s head, and slams it on the pencil. And then The Joker slides the bodyguard off the table\***

**The Joker** : “Tadaaa!! It’s...gone...”

The type of incongruity that occurs from the utterance is impersonation because The Joker is trying to mimic the performance of a magician who tries to make objects disappear in one of their performances, although it was merely a display of his brutality because the pencil does not actually disappear from the table, it only gets stuck in one of the gang members’ eye after The Joker slammed his face against the pencil. Meanwhile the maxims he flouts are maxim of quality and maxim of relation. He flouts maxim of quality because he does not actually perform a magic trick. The statement is actually also a sarcastic response to mock the mobs’ demand for him to show them entertainment, and a magic trick is one type of entertainment. This also explains why he flouts the maxim of relation. There is no need for him to display the ‘magic trick’, but he uses it to deflect the threat by making a joke while sending back a threat of his own to his opponents. He is just prompting for a response to his counterpart asking him to give them a good reason to spare him, which is supposed to be by coming up with an idea or news that can benefit them instead of just mocking them. However, he deflects the request by performing a ‘magic trick’, as if he is a jester who is told to entertain the royalty. This dark joke also precedes The Joker’s horrific and sociopathic evil action that makes fun of an upcoming horror.

*Max Nicholai Tesla, Indah Wahyuningsih, Sabta Diana – The Disclosure of Dark Humor and Comedic Sociopathy through Incongruities Made by the Villain the Joker in the Dark Knight Movie*

After analyzing the utterances made by The Joker using the incongruity theory which is designated by the flouting of Gricean maxims, some jokes are able to be identified in the category of dark joke as a display of sociopathic comedy. Conversational implicature is also used in the analysis to help determine the hidden messages in each extract by elaborating the context of speaking.

Out of five types of incongruity that are acknowledged in this research, four of them appear in the data. The most dominant type of incongruity to occur in the jokes is ignorance. This is indicated by the act of flouting, which is done intentionally to violate the cooperative principle. The application of this incongruity is shown through wordplay (the multi-interpretation of a word or expression) and the reluctance to have a coherent conversation. Some of the wordplays come in a sarcastic style, with the purpose of mocking the person being spoken to. The reason why The Joker tends to create this kind of incongruity is because he often intentionally ignores the knowledge that he has in the construction of his jokes. This is shown in the way he tells jokes that involve wordplay. To add, The Joker also has the tendency to ignore the preceding sentence said by his counterparts with a joke to with a purpose to deflect threats that are pointed to him or to mock his adversaries.

The next incongruity to appear quite frequently is moral shortcomings. As a sociopathic character, the moral shortcomings incongruity that appear from The Joker's dark jokes appear as the mockery of human tragedies and the joy of committing immoral acts. His lack of understanding of the human nature and the values they hold plays a huge part in the making of these jokes.

The other two types of incongruity that appear the least from the findings are impersonation and physical deformities. Impersonation is performed by The Joker on three occasions and they are used to cause upset for others and to make a dramatic opening to his jokes. Moreover, he also uses impersonation just before he is about to do or ask for something menacing. In order that his opponents are unaware of what his next moves are, The Joker



starts it off with a joke. In a different manner, The Joker also tries to threaten his enemies using self-deprecation and dramatization. That strategy occurs in the physical deformities incongruity. The Joker tells his enemies of different stories about how he got scarred and makes fun of that tragedy. He adds more horrifying details to his stories to make them sound more deranged that they actually are. The purpose of these jokes is to spark fear to his enemies because The Joker is able to make fun of his own tragic life, so that means he either has lost his mind or that means nothing can make feel afraid anymore, both cases are intimidating and the enemies will think twice before they mess with The Joker.

### **Discussion**

Based on the analysis, there are four types of incongruities that can be identified from the data (The Joker's utterances which contain dark jokes.) They are ignorance, impersonation, moral shortcomings, and physical deformities. The analysis involves highlighting the joke-making incongruities to discover the motive behind each dark joke and identifying maxim flouting in relation to the incongruities that occur.

The most dominant type of incongruity from the data is ignorance (found in 11 extracts). From the analysis, it can be identified that The Joker makes this kind of incongruity mostly in the form of wordplay to put a dark twist in the meaning of words and expressions in English. The motive behind the use of this joke delivery is to ridicule his opponents and the tragedy that is about to or has happened to them. More specifically, The Joker uses wordplay mostly to initiate an evil deed to make it sound funny. In other cases, he also uses ignorance to just completely ignore the context of the conversation and the feelings of his counterparts on purpose, because he wants to deflect the threat that he receives and return the threat. Therefore, the most common pairing to this incongruity is the flouting of the maxim of quality, due to his lack of authenticity when he uses an expression. There are also instances where the

flouted maxims are maxim of quantity and maxim of relation. The flouting of maxim of quantity is used when he wants to play mind games with his opponents, to make them decipher what he really means when he says something. On the other hand, the flouting of the maxim of relation is used when he does not have any regards for his opponents; he just wants to send a message and to spark fear to his enemies.

The second dominant type of incongruity that is found from the data is moral shortcomings (found in 6 extracts). The Joker creates this incongruity by describing tragedies, crimes, and other acts that are against the moral values as entertainment. He does this as a display of his sociopathic side that enjoys chaos. The two flouted maxims that come alongside this incongruity are maxim of relation and quantity. When The Joker delivers his dark jokes which involve the violation of social norms, he often does it to speak his mind and implicitly make a statement about himself in order to establish fear towards his adversaries. Furthermore, he tends to neglect the questions and threats directed to him by making those jokes. At times, the jokes are not conversationally coherent, because he intentionally deflects them to shift the threat. Thus he flouts the maxim of relation. Meanwhile, the flouting of the maxim of quantity that is aligned with moral shortcomings incongruity occurs when The Joker gives a hint about what he has done that has brought misfortunes for others using dark jokes. It appears that he is making a riddle to play with the people he interacts with. Because of the lack of information that he provides in his utterances, he has flouted the maxim of quantity.

The next type of incongruity is impersonation (found in 4 extracts). The Joker uses this to mimic people to initiate his delivery of dark jokes and acts of villainy. Unpredictability is the reason why he does this so that the enemies never know what will happen after The Joker delivers his jokes. The flouted maxims that go along with this incongruity are maxim of quality, quantity, and relation. The maxim of quality is flouted in The Joker's words of impersonation because the reality is completely different from what he says. For instance, he

impersonates a magician who says that he is about to perform a magic trick when the reality is, he wants to hurt someone. The same purpose is also used for the flouting of the maxim of quantity. The Joker impersonates business superiors when they hire new employees. However, the true intention is to ask them to kill each other for the qualification. As for the flouting of the maxim of relation, The Joker does impersonation all of a sudden simply to dodge threats and questions that come his way.

To finish, the last incongruity that appears in the data is physical deformities (found in 3 extracts), all of which come in the same theme of a fictional narrative about The Joker's scars and how he got them. Just like the previous incongruity, the flouted maxims that are linked with physical deformities from the data are maxim of quality, quantity, and relation. From the same setup that The Joker builds to self-deprecate his defected appearance, it is not known which story is actually true from the two stories that he tells (the third one has not finished yet.) There might not even be a true story from both. Therefore, he flouts the maxim of quality for lack of credentials. By the same token, the maxim of quantity is also flouted because The Joker keeps giving unnecessary details to his story, in order to make his stories sound more tragic and intimidating. Finally, the maxim of relation is flouted because The Joker tells his stories in the middle of a conversation that talks about something else. The motive of telling these stories is to make his enemy feel intimidated and terrified. By doing so, he wants to send a message to his enemies to not mess with him.

Additionally, there are a couple of cases where there are two incongruities in one joke. In both cases, moral shortcomings incongruity is present, each paired with ignorance and impersonation incongruities. The motive of the ignorance-moral shortcomings combination is to deflect a question with an immoral statement to annoy his enemy, while the impersonation-moral shortcomings combination is used by The Joker to make a dramatic opening for a short speech about The Joker's discontentment of an

established order and how he implicitly shows that he wants to keep that from happening.

In summary, the incongruities that occur in a joke can be designated and correlate with the flouting of maxims. In this display of dark joke, The Joker has full awareness of the jokes he produces, and the purposes of his jokes are to mock human misfortunes because he enjoys them; to deflect threats from his enemies and to send a message to them in exchange; most importantly, he always delivers dark jokes to initiate evil deeds, meaning that he has no sympathy to others, as a display of his sociopathy. All of those purposes are delivered through implicit utterances, to display his wit as a villain and to establish himself as one of the most dangerous and unpredictable villains in Gotham.

## CONCLUSION

In relation to the incongruities, out of four kinds of Gricean maxims that are embodied in this research, there are three that are flouted by The Joker in the making of his jokes. They are the maxim of quality, quantity, and relation. From the three, the maxim of quality is the most frequently flouted maxim because The Joker intentionally violates the maxim (therefore he flouts it) and he is fully aware of the jokes he makes. The way he flouts the maxim is through wordplay, and the intentional pretention of not understanding what his counterparts say. Meanwhile, the flouting of maxim of quantity occurs when The Joker wants to annoy his enemies by giving minimum information, or he exaggerates his stories when he wants to say something dramatic before committing a crime. And finally, the maxim of relation is flouted when The Joker completely neglects the preceding conversation by his enemies and comes up with a random joke, usually just before he does something evil.

In short, The Joker has many ways of delivering his dark joke as a display of his sociopathic character. The incongruities and the maxims he flouts vary, although there is dominance in ignorance type of incongruity and the

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flouting of maxim of quality. The reasons why The Joker makes dark jokes are because he enjoys the misfortunes of others and he sees them as entertainment as a sociopath that he is; he wants to shift the threats pointed to him and uses the jokes as the way for him to threaten his enemies back; and because he want to maintain unpredictability of his evil deeds by telling jokes with a dark twist at the end, just before he commits acts of crime. He uses a lot of implicatures to confuse his opponents and to keep them from understanding the way The Joker thinks and acts. As a result, The Joker can maintain his status as one of the most dangerous criminals in Gotham and he can keep spreading chaos there.

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*Max Nicholai Tesla, Indah Wahyuningsih, Sabta Diana – The Disclosure of Dark Humor and Comedic Sociopathy through Incongruities Made by the Villain the Joker in the Dark Knight Movie*

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