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# A SEMANTIC APPROACH TO 'FRIENDS' TV SERIES

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**Abstract**

The aim of this article is to revisit Leech's meaning typology as applied to the widely popular TV series 'Friends'. The seven types of meaning postulated by Geoffrey Leech (1981): conceptual, connotative, social, affective, reflected, collocative and thematic will be exemplified with dialogues from the sitcom. The analysis will be made mainly from a semantic perspective, and less focus will be attached to the pragmatic side of conversations under scrutiny, as Leech himself considers that meaning is impartial between 'speaker's meaning' and 'hearer's meaning'. The analysed corpus consisted of approximately 880,000 words, resulting from the script of all 232 episodes, through 10 seasons. In particular, the social and affective meaning are the one most closely related to pragmatic speech acts. The dialogues, as was stated by other researchers (Qualio 2009), are less prone to deploying strategic vagueness, being more context-based than concentrating on the narration of imaginary or past events, with actually a minimal plot.

**Key words:** Types of meaning, Leech's typology, 'Friends' TV series.

## 1 Introduction

'Friends' is an American TV sitcom created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, which was aired on NBC over a span of 10 years, from 1994 to 2004. The series concentrates on the lives of six main characters in their 20's (early 30's in the last season): Rachel Green (spoiled child, adorable drama queen), Monica Geller (smart, attractive, a real fighter), Phoebe Buffay (unmaterialistic, good-hearted, lovable artist), Joey Tribbiani (handsome, egotistic, macho, joker-type of character), Chandler Bing (great sense of humour, sarcastic, the typical orphan) and Ross Geller (Monica's brother, intelligent, emotional, romantic). The story unfolds at three main settings: a Manhattan coffeehouse (Central Perk) and the apartment of Monica and Rachel and across the hall, that of Joey and Chandler. The series has met with huge audience success and has since been the subject of numerous studies in pragmatics, conversation analysis, humours studies, etc. (Tagliamonte, & Roberts 2005; Quaglio 2009; Richardson 2010). The situational humour is constructed mainly through dialogues, which are largely context-based, and thus, it

may represent an adequate source for sociolinguistic or pragmatic analyses. According to Rey (2001: 138), despite differences between the language used in television series and unscripted language, the former reflects the language scriptwriters envisage as being produced by real people. This may have determined some scholars (e.g., Washburn 2001) to recommend the use of sitcoms in ESL classes, in particular for teaching and learning pragmatic language (e.g., speech acts) and conversational patterns. Moreover, the series' long-lasting success is also due to its tackling less traditional issues in the American society: same-sex marriage, infertility, adoption, surrogacy, transgender people, quite boldly, despite the occasional homophobic or transphobic overtones. The humorous, apparently lightweight manner in which such issues are raised in every-day conversations may set an example of how to deal with them. Winzenburg (2004: 11) referred to sitcoms as the most prevalent type of programming of popular media, i.e., television, exerting a massive impact on the way "we think and what we think about". Additionally, viewers tend to associate a certain sitcom with a particular time of their life. In other words, the language of 'Friends' achieves viewer identification and at the same time it expresses and reflects American popular culture, specific of a certain period of time.

## 2 Geoffrey Leech's Typology of Meaning

There are two approaches in which semantics apparently deals with meaning: a larger one, i.e., 'all that is communicated by language'; and a more restricted one, i.e., the study of logical or conceptual meaning. (Leech 1981: 9)

Semantics in the former, wider sense can take us back to Bloomfield's argument about 'all that may be the object of human knowledge or belief' (1933: 139-140). Consequently, he advocates a taxonomy of meanings, which could all fall under the global cumulative effect of linguistic communication, by which he could demonstrate that approaches may differ from one type of meaning to another, nevertheless accounting for differences between what a word means to the general public and what it may mean to an individual speaker in a communication process.

Thus, 'meaning' in its broadest sense can be divided into seven different parts, giving priority to *logical* meaning or *conceptual* meaning, which was considered in relation with 'semantic competence'. The ensuing six meaning types advocated by Leech are *connotative* meaning, *social* meaning, *affective* meaning, *reflected* meaning, *collocative* meaning, and *thematic* meaning.

Leech further classifies these seven types into three distinct categories: *conceptual*, *associative* and *thematic*. The associative meaning is to be found in situation-based utterances (social – including the illocutionary force of an utterance, as well as affective) and lexical-based meaning (reflected and collocative). As a general rule, decoding this type of associative meaning is performed on the basis of contiguities of the individual's experience, and thus it is

less stable than denotative meaning, which is, in contrast, part of the 'common system' of a language shared by the members belonging to a speech community.

## 3 Analysis

### 3.1 Conceptual meaning

The *conceptual* meaning (also known as '*denotative'* or '*cognitive'* meaning) is generally regarded as the central factor in linguistic communication, representing a basic element of the essential functioning of language, different from the other types of meaning (although it is not the most significant element of every act of linguistic communication). It is the literal, straightforward dictionary definition of a word, with a complex structure, somewhat similar to the organisation of language at syntactic and phonological levels. Leech identifies two structural principles underlying all linguistic patterning: 'the principle of contrastiveness and the principle of structure' (1981: 9). I will take in the following the example of the word 'mother', the definition of which is:

> **mother** n. [C] a female parent (a woman who has given birth to a child); also, a form of address.

This dictionary meaning explains that **mother** is a noun pertaining to a woman who has given birth to a child, as opposed to a male parent (a father), and that could be used in linguistic communication, e.g.

> My mother was 23 years old when she gave birth to me. (= female parent)
> or
> May I borrow your red stilettos, Mother? (= form of address)

Another meaning recorded by the dictionary, acquired by association with other words, is Mother Nature:

> **Mother Nature** n. [U] nature, especially when considered as a force that controls the weather and all living things (usually used humorously)

> **Phoebe**: (looking up) There it is! Oh, look at that! Isn't Mother Nature amazing?
> **Chandler**: (looking up with her) That's a plane!
> **Phoebe**: Well, all right. 1700 bags of peanuts flying that high, that's pretty amazing too. (Friends, S.7, Ep.12)

Moreover, meaning can also differ according to the compound nouns that 'mother' can come into:

> **mother ship** n. [C] (also **mothership**) a large ship or spacecraft from which other smaller ones are launched or get supplies; a place regarded as a base, source, or headquarters.

However, in the dialogue below, it means that a Saks Fifth Avenue luxury department store would be Rachel's true element:

> **Rachel**: Oooooh. (reads letter) (surprised): Oh! I got an interview! I got an interview!
> **Monica**: You're kidding! Where? Where?
> **Rachel**: (in disbelief): Sak's... Fifth... Avenue.
> **Monica**: Oh, Rachel!
> **Phoebe**: Oh, it's like the mother ship is calling you home. (Friends, S.1, Ep.18)

### 3.2 Connotative meaning

What we have above referred to as being specific to conceptual meaning will be better understood in opposition with the connotative meaning. By this we mean 'the **communicative value** an expression has' as a result of what it refers to **over** and **above** its purely conceptual content' (Leech 1981: 12). Broadly speaking, the notion of 'reference' overlays upon that of conceptual meaning. Let us take for example the word **woman**, which is conceptually characterised by the following features: +HUMAN, -MALE, +ADULT. In this case, these three properties 'human', 'adult', and 'female' would then indicate how to correctly use the word. The contrastive features mentioned above, interpreted in 'real world' terms, will turn into the properties of the referent. Nevertheless, there is a whole array of supplementary, non-criterial attributes, which according to our own experience, we expect a woman (as referent) to possess. Among these we can mention, on the one hand, physical properties (i.e., 'biped', 'having a womb'), and on the other psychological and social characteristics ('gregarious', 'subject to maternal instinct'). Moreover, one could think of further features that are simply typical rather than immutable invariants of womanhood ('capable of speech', 'experienced in cookery', 'skirt-or-dress-wearing') (Leech 1981: 12). Additionally, connotative meaning can encompass the *'putative properties*' (when a speaker does not have direct evidence of what he or she is stating but has inferred it based on something else) of the referent, considering the perspective of a person, a group of people or an entire society.

The dialogue below takes place at the Museum of Prehistoric History, where Ross and his co-worker (Marsha) are discussing while preparing an exhibit which displays mannequins representing cave people. Marsha attributes the supposed anger of the female mannequin to marital problems with her male partner, including cleaning the carpet, assuming that all housewives have the same 'issues'.

**Ross**: No, it's good, it is good, it's just that- mm- doesn't she seem a little angry?
**Marsha**: Well, she has issues.
**Ross**: Does she.
**Marsha**: He's out banging other women over the head with a club, while she sits at home trying to get the mastodon smell out of the carpet!
**Ross**: Marsha, these are cave people. Okay? They have issues like 'Gee, that glacier's getting kinda close.' See? (Friends, S.1, Ep.2)

### 3.3 Social meaning

In the following we will concentrate on aspects of communication referring to the situation when an utterance takes place. The first one is social meaning, by which we understand the meaning transmitted by a piece of language about the social circumstances surrounding its use. We partly decode the social meaning of a message by recognising different features and levels of style within a given language. We can identify certain words or pronunciations as dialectal, indicative of the social or geographical origin of the speaker, whereas other language characteristics point to 'the social relationship between the speaker and hearer'; we can establish a scale of speaker 'status', from formal, official, literary English down to familiar, colloquial, even slang English.

In the following examples, I will present some examples of social meaning variations. The first one offers an illustration of the in-group language only known to its members. Rachel, who has just recently joined the group, is learning the new meanings attached to what people say in dating settings:

**Ross:** Hey. Oh, oh, how'd it go?
**Phoebe:** Um, not so good. He walked me to the subway and said 'We should do this again!'
**All:** Ohh. Ouch.
**Rachel:** What? He said 'we should do it again', that's good, right?
**Monica:** Uh, no. Loosely translated 'We should do this again' means 'You will never see me naked'.
**Rachel:** Since when?
**Joey:** Since always. It's like dating language. Y'know, like 'It's not you' means 'It is you'.
**Chandler:** Or 'You're such a nice guy' means 'I'm gonna be dating leather-wearing alcoholics and complaining about them to you'.
**Phoebe:** Or, or, y'know, um, 'I think we should see other people' means 'Ha, ha, I already am'.
**Rachel:** And everybody knows this?
**Joey:** Yeah. Cushions the blow.
**Chandler:** Yeah, it's like when you're a kid, and your parents put your dog to sleep, and they tell you it went off to live on some farm.
**Ross:** That's funny, that, no, because, uh, our parents actually did, uh, send our dog off to live on a farm.
**Monica:** Uh, Ross.

> **Ross:** What? Wh- hello? The Millners' farm in Connecticut? The Millners, they had this unbelievable farm, they had horses, and, and rabbits that he could chase and it was- it w- ...Oh my God, Chi Chi! (Friends, S.1, Ep.3)

A dreadful realisation, which contributes to the situational humour, happens when Ross (an intelligent, but otherwise naïve and emotional palaeontologist) realizes that his parents actually euthanised his favourite dog when he was a child and lied to him, in order to spare his feelings).

The next example is a sample of formal register used over the telephone with some bank representatives. Obviously, the conversation between the two young ladies is colloquial (with contractions, annoying repetitions, short linking words, etc.):

> (The phone rings and Monica answers it.)
> **Monica:** Uh, Rach, it's the *Visa* card people.
> **Rachel:** Oh, God, ask them what they want.
> **Monica:** (on phone) Could you please tell me what this is in reference to? (Listens) Yes, hold on. (To Rachel) Um, they say there's been some unusual activity on your account.
> **Rachel:** But I haven't used my card in weeks!
> **Monica:** That **is** the unusual activity. Look, they just wanna see if you're okay.
> **Rachel:** They wanna know if I'm okay. Okay, they wanna know if I'm okay, okay, let's see. Well, let's see, the FICA guys took all my money, everyone I know is either getting married, or getting promoted, or getting pregnant, and I'm getting coffee! And it's not even for me! So if that sounds like I'm okay, okay, then you can tell them I'm okay, okay?
> **Monica:** (pauses then on the phone) Uh- Rachel has left the building, can you call back? (Friends, S.1, Ep.4)

### 3.4 Affective meaning

A second type of meaning influenced by the situation in which an utterance takes place is affective meaning, which is frequently expressed overtly by means of 'the conceptual or connotative content of the words used'. (Leech 1981: 15) A speaker's personal feelings, his attitude towards the lister or to the subject he's tackling may be reflected in the language he or she uses.

In the following dialogue, the public obviously senses the humorous undertones, and their reaction to somebody saying they have killed somebody is naturally one of disbelief, and this is the reason why the public bursts out laughing at Chandler's serious face, and the comedy of situation is quite verisimilar.

> **Monica:** (entering) Hey. Where's Joey?
> **Chandler:** Joey ate my last stick of gum, so I killed him. Do you think that was wrong? (Friends, S.1, Ep.3)

Likewise, in the next line, the audience is convinced of the opposite of what is asserted just by seeing Chandler's face and expressionless tone, after his friends have applied him a nicotine patch meant to help him quit smoking:

> **Chandler:** (deadpan) Ooh, I'm alive with pleasure now. (Friends, S.1, Ep.3)

Affective meaning is largely a co-dependent category meaning that we express our emotions with the help of other categories of meaning - conceptual, connotative, or stylistic. The example below is representative of how affective meaning may rely on metaphorical expressions, which, however, risk being misunderstood, since the affective meaning is rather individual in nature.

> **Rachel:** C'mon Daddy, listen to me! It's like, it's like, all of my life, everyone has always told me, 'You're a shoe! You're a shoe, you're a shoe, you're a shoe!'. And today I just stopped and I said, 'What if I don't wanna be a shoe? What if I wanna be a - a purse, y'know? Or a- or a hat! No, I'm not saying I want you to buy me a hat, I'm saying I am a ha- It's a metaphor, Daddy! (Friends, S.1, Ep.1)

In this dialogue between Rachel (who has just abandoned her bridegroom at the altar) and her father, she uses the word 'shoe' in order to justify her actions. She tries to account for her behaviour by making a comparison with what she loves most, i.e., fashion. Nevertheless, her message is not grasped by her father, who thinks that his daughter is probably bored and wants a new hat.

The next example is another instance of how speakers adapt their speech according to their feelings. Within the same group of friends, their shortcomings are accepted (Joey cracks his knuckles, Phoebe chews her hair, Ross speaks over-correctly, Rachel is an awful waitress, always mixing up orders) by virtue of the fact they stick to each other no matter what. The moment they say the truth, it comes as unexpected, but nevertheless, they try to mitigate it (Rachel for Joey, Ross for Phoebe, etc.):

> (Chandler lights a cigarette.)
> **All:** Oh, hey, don't do that! Cut it out! […]
> **Chandler:** So I have a flaw! Big deal! Like Joey's constant knuckle-cracking isn't annoying? And Ross, with his over-pronouncing every single word? And Monica, with that snort when she laughs? I mean, what the hell is that thing? ...I accept all those flaws, why can't you accept me for this?
> (An awkward silence ensues.)
> **Joey:** ...Does the knuckle-cracking bother everybody?
> **Rachel:** Well, I-I could live without it.
> **Joey:** Well, is it, like, a little annoying, or is it like when Phoebe chews her hair?
> (Phoebe spits out her hair.)
> **Ross:** Oh, now, don't listen to him, Pheebs, I think it's endearing.
> **Joey:** Oh, (Imitating Ross) "you do, do you"?
> (Monica laughs and snorts.)

**Ross:** You know, there's nothing wrong with speaking correctly.
**Rachel:** "Indeed there isn't" ... I should really get back to work.
**Phoebe:** Yeah, 'cause otherwise someone might get what they actually ordered.
**Rachel:** Ohh-ho-hooohhh. The hair comes out, and the gloves come on. (Friends, S.1, Ep.3)

The moment of truth was prompted by Chandler, who has just resumed smoking, and he uses this conversational stratagem just to distract his friends' attention from him so as to be able to smoke, undisturbed.

### 3.5 Reflected meaning

According to Geoffrey Leech (1981: 16), there are two more types of meaning that are related to the lexical dimension of a language. The first one, reflected meaning is the meaning occurring in the case of multiple conceptual meaning (polysemy), when one sense of a word forms part of our response to another sense. The example he gives is taken from the language of church service, i.e., the synonymous expressions *The Comforter* and *The Holy Ghost*, both of which refer to the *Third Person* of the *Trinity*. In general, somebody's reactions to these terms are conditioned by the ordinary non-religious meanings of comfort and ghost. The first term, *The Comforter* sounds affectionate and 'comforting' (although in theological vocabulary, it means 'the strengthener or supporter'), whereas *The Holy Ghost* gives the impression of something rather fearsome.

In the following dialogue from Friends, Chandler's reaction is motivated by the 'reflection' of the verb 'to see' (= to be conscious of what is around you by using your eyes, but also, = to have a romantic relationship with someone):

**Joey:** Have you seen Monica?
**Chandler:** (Very defensive.) I'm not seeing Monica. (Friends, S.4, Ep.24)

Chandler would probably have never thought of giving such a reply had he not spent the previous night with a drunken, depressed Monica. They had not yet had time to process what had happened and were not ready to make it public to their friends. Nevertheless, they are afraid the others might have found out, somehow.

The next dialogue is another example of how meaning associations can be made based on not necessarily polysemous words, but on homophones / lack of lexical knowledge:

**Joey:** […] But it is odd how a women's purse looks good on me, a man.
**Rachel:** Exactly! Unisex!
**Joey:** Maybe you need sex. **I** had sex a couple days ago.
**Rachel:** No! No Joey! U-N-I-sex.
**Joey:** Well, I ain't gonna say no to that. (Friends, S.5, Ep.13)

Joey is a good-looking, macho aspiring actor, funny and caring, though dim-witted at times. In the above exchange, humour is generated by the fact that Joey does know the meaning of unisex (= usu. of clothes, designed for use by both men and women rather than by only one sex). The first time Rachel pronounces the word, Joey understands "You need sex", to which he self-assuredly replies that he certainly does not need it. Rachel repeats the word, this time spelling the first three letters (U-N-I /ju:enai/), an endeavour likewise useless, as this time Joey understands "You and I sex".

The same type of misunderstanding also arises in the following conversation:

> **Chandler**: Look, I just think it's time for you to settle down, you know? Make a choice, pick a lane!
> **Joey**: Who's Elaine? (Friends, S.4, Ep.7)

Joey does clearly not understand the meaning of the expression 'to pick a lane', which refers in this context to settling down with a partner, i.e., committing to one relationship.

### 3.6 Collocative meaning

According to Leech (1981: 17), the second type of meaning related to the lexical dimension of a language is the collocative meaning, which comprises the associations a word acquires as a result of the meanings of words that tend to occur in its vicinity. The examples given by Leech are the adjectives 'pretty' and 'handsome', which both share the meaning component '(physically) attractive', however with differing additional meaning components relative to male or female sex: **pretty** adj. pleasant to look at, or (esp. of girls or women or things connected with them) attractive or charming in a delicate way and **handsome** adj. (esp. of a man) physically attractive (Cambridge Dictionary Online). When the adjective 'handsome' is associated with the female sex, it borrows traditionally male characteristics: e.g., 'a *handsome woman* in her fifties' is attractive in a strong way.

> **Joey**: You don't think my mom's sexy?
> **Ross**: Well... not in the same way...
> **Joey**: I'll have you know that Gloria Tribbiani was a handsome woman in her day, alright? You think it's easy giving birth to seven children?
> **Ross**: Okay, I think we're getting into a weird area here... (Friends, S.1, Ep.11)

Leech (1981: 17) further contends that not all differences in probable co-occurrence are to be explained on account of collocative meaning, some are attributed to stylistic variations, while other are assignable to conceptual differences. Collocative meaning, he concludes, is merely an idiosyncratic characteristic of individual words.

### 3.7 Thematic meaning

The last class proposed by Leech (1981: 19) is *thematic meaning*, by which he defines what is communicated by the way in which a speaker or writer organises their message, from the viewpoint of ordering, focus, and emphasis. It is commonly believed that a sentence in the active voice has a different meaning from its passive equivalent, although in conceptual content they seem to be identical:

> **Ross**: My friend Bethel rescued him from some lab. (Friends, S.1, Ep.10)

The sentence above would carry the same conceptual meaning as: *He was rescued by my friend Bethel*, although they have distinct communicative values, pertaining to different contexts: the first sentence would answer the question 'Who did my friend Bethel rescue?', whereas the passive sentence would answer the question 'Who rescued him?' For certain, the reference to the deictic 'he' is clear to the speakers, from the conversation they had before Marcel, the capuchin monkey briefly adopted by Ross). Nevertheless, the same truth conditions apply to both sentences, we cannot find any situation in which one of them was (in)accurate and the other was not.

Moreover, it can be said that thematic meaning is largely a matter of choice between substitute grammatical constructions, as in:

> **Monica**: […] Umm, but ah, there's a blue fingernail in one of the quiche cups, and there's no way to know which one... (Friends, S.3, Ep.4).

as compared to, say:

> A blue fingernail in one of the quiche cups, and one couldn't know which one...

For the sake of emphasis (placing the focus of attention on the words or expressions that contain new information), the syntactic construction 'there is' is used by Monica, who also uses the same construction to emphasise the fact that it would be impossible for anyone, not only for her, to find that nail she dropped in the food she cooked. When introducing Marcel, the monkey to his friends, Ross says:

> **Ross**: Guys? There's a somebody I'd like you to meet. (Friends, S.1, Ep.10)

instead of *I'd like you to meet somebody*, in order to underline the 'person' he wants to introduce, thus personifying the monkey. Similarly, the following sentence:

> Chandler is standing in the doorway, not wanting to participate in the festivities. (Friends, S1, Ep.9)

could be rephrased as: *Not wanting to participate in the festivities, Chandler is standing in the doorway*, with a focus on the reason why Chandler is standing in the doorway and not entering the room.

In the following example, the communicator wants to stress the whole idea of her misery, due to the fact that her current boyfriend has not called her, aggravated by Ross's alleged happiness in Vermont:

> **Rachel**: ...Ugh, you know what makes it so much worse, Ross is all happy in Vermont! (Friends, S4, Ep.14)

This utterance could have had a different syntactic structure, e.g. *It's so much worse that Ross is all happy in Vermont!*, which semantically would have has the same meaning, although the communicative might have been different. The context obviously plays an important part in the choice of the script writer.

## 4 Conclusion

It should not be overlooked, however, that Geoffrey Leech's (1981: 20) taxonomy is in no way exhaustive, as other categories of meaning might be brought forth and additionally, there will always be problems regarding demarcation between categories, as well as issues related to distinguishing conceptual meaning from the other, more peripheral categories, such as socio-stylistic meaning. The idea of conceptual synonyms differentiated stylistically, was further tackled by D.A. Cruse, in his work *Lexical Meaning* (1986). Leech himself elucidates why he has not made a clear distinction between the *intended* meaning (existing in the mind of the speaker when encoding the message) and the *interpreted* meaning (decoded in the mind of the message receiver), clarifying that, as a linguist, he was more concerned with the communication system itself, rather than the use or misuse of it. From a semantic-based perspective, meaning is impartial between 'speaker's meaning' and 'hearer's meaning'. Leech (1981: 22) finally states that 'intentions are private, but meaning is public', even in the case of social meaning, and the intention of the speaker only acquires worth from the meaning itself.

To conclude, a semantic analysis grid may successfully be applied to sitcoms, especially in those cases that dialogues replicate real life. Friends, along with other American TV series may represent useful materials in teaching English semantics, not only pragmatics or conversation analysis.

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