

# **A Discourse Analysis of the American Sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*: The Construction of a Geek Identity**

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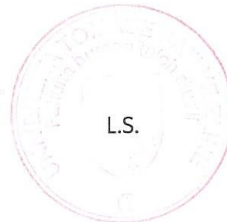
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## **ABSTRAKT**

Hlavním cílem této bakalářské práce je analyzovat konstrukci identity postav amerického sitkomu *Teorie velkého třesku*, které jsou známé jako geekové. Teoretická část se zabývá objasněním pojmů týkajících se diskurzivní analýzy a také popisuje oblast pragmatiky a jejího principu kooperace. Dále jsou vysvětleny pojmy identita geeka a žánr sitkomu obecně. Teoretickou část uzavírá seznámení čtenáře s konkrétním sitkomem *Teorie velkého třesku*.

Praktická část rozebírá vybrané fragmenty poskytnutých dat z pohledu diskurzivní analýzy a pragmatického principu kooperace. Tato část zkoumá, jaké diskursivní prostředky přispívají ke konstrukci identity geeka u postav daného sitkomu.

Klíčová slova: geek, identita, sitkom, diskurz, diskurzivní analýza, pragmatika, kooperační princip

## **ABSTRACT**

The main goal of this bachelor thesis is to analyze the construction of identity of characters of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* known as geeks. The theoretical part deals with description of terms related to the discourse analysis and also describes the pragmatic field and its cooperative principle. Then the geek identity and the sitcom genre in general are explained. The theoretical part is concluded by the familiarization of the reader with the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.

The practical part analyzes selected fragments of given data from the perspective of the discourse analysis and the pragmatic cooperative principle. It examines what discursive devices contribute to the construction of the geek identity of characters of given sitcom.

Keywords: geek, identity, sitcom, discourse, discourse analysis, pragmatics, cooperative principle

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## INTRODUCTION

The word geek has become a frequently mentioned and fashionable term recently. Nevertheless, who of those people that talk about the geeks exactly know what those four letters mean? An approximate view of geeks' lives can be provided by one of the most popular American sitcoms nowadays *The Big Bang Theory*, which serves as a corpus material in this thesis. Although other audiovisual materials that describe the lives of geeks are available, the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is considered as the best corpus material due to its huge popularity and people's awareness of its plot and characters.

The thesis itself consists of two parts – theoretical and practical. First of all the theoretical part is devoted to explanation of terms related to the discourse analysis, such as discourse and context. Secondly it deals with the field of pragmatics and the cooperative principle, which is drawn upon in the analysis. Then the chapter about the sitcom follows, where the term sitcom is defined generally and the specific American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is introduced. The theoretical part is concluded by the general explanation what the word identity means and then the terms geek and nerd as parts of concrete identity are described.

Regarding the practical part, first of all a description of the corpus and methodology of the analysis is provided there. The main aspect that is analyzed in the practical part of this thesis is geeks' language and its influence on their identity. Although the geeks' language is seen as a base for construction of their identity, there are also other non-language aspects that accompany the language ones. The other objective of this thesis is to compare those geeks' aspects with non-geek ones, which are illustrated by Penny's character in this sitcom. Her personality serves as an opposite to the geek characters and helps to emphasize the aspects that contribute to the construction of the other characters' geek identity. The practical part is concluded with the examples of situations in which the geek characters do not observe the four maxims of the cooperative principle and thus reveal their characteristic traits that create their geek identity.

The aim of this thesis is to familiarize people with the meaning of the word geek, to discover the aspects that contribute to the construction of the identity of the geek characters of this sitcom and to compare their identity with a non-geek one. This construction is analyzed in the practical part of this thesis that is based on the transcripts of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.

## **I. THEORY**

## 1 DISCOURSE AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

For better understanding of the analytical part of this thesis, which is going to deal with specific genre of discourse, discourse of sitcoms, firstly it is important to explain crucial terms connected with discourse. The terms such as spoken discourse, discourse analysis and context will be explained in this chapter.

### 1.1 Discourse

The simplest way how to define the term discourse is provided by Cook, who describes it as “language in use” (1989, 6). Gee agrees with this idea that the discourse is “any instance of language-in-use” and completes Cook’s definition with his own additional comment that the discourse can also be “any stretch of spoken or written language” (2011a, 205). To create a basis for further understanding of this term, Jorgensen and Phillips provide an explanation from the point of view of people who socialize together and take part in various areas of social life. They state that the discourse is meant as general term, where language of people who socialize is arranged according to various patterns, which people’s utterances should follow (2002, 1).

Fairclough also supports a social structure of the discourse and states that language is not an individual approach; vice versa it is formed socially and helps to create social relationships among people. Moreover, Fairclough distinguishes 3 effects that production of the discourse has – first of all the discourse constructs social identities (which corresponds to the identity function of language), secondly the discourse helps its participants to set up social relationships (corresponds to the relational function of language) and the third effect relates to how texts signify world processes and relations (which corresponds to the ideational function of language). He adds that sometimes the identity function and the relational function are called together as the interpersonal function. The last function of language is known as the textual function and shows how pieces of information can be highlighted or overshadowed, shows their presentation to readers and their linking to other parts of the text (1992, 63-65).

Cook contrasts the idea about collective formation of language with his comment on a degree of subjectivity in identifying a piece of language as the discourse. He claims that what makes sense to one person does not have to be understandable for another (1989, 7). To extend this claim, Widdowson says that the discourse creates two different kinds of references, the first is what meaning a producer of the text gives to the text itself and the

second how the receiver is able to understand the text and what does it mean to him (2007, 7).

Widdowson also comments on the discourse from the point of view of text and admits that “discourse underlies the text and motivates its production”. He develops this idea more by saying that we use language as a tool for production of certain text and it does not matter if this text is simple or complex, still we produce it for some purpose (2007, 6).

It may happen that the discourse is so complex that it is difficult to orient in it, so it needs some special arrangement. For this purpose discourse markers or alternatively said linking words serve well. Those markers are used when we want to connect pieces of the discourse together (BBC Learning English 2014). Then it is easier to follow these connections between previous and following utterances. The exact definition of this term is provided by Deborah Shiffrin, who says that the discourse markers are “one set of linguistic items that function in cognitive, expressive, social, and textual domains”. She adds that each of those linguistic expressions belongs to some word class, such as adverbs (well, then), conjunctions (but, or), interjections (oh) and phrases known as ‘fillers’ (you know, I mean) (2001, 54, 57).

### **1.1.1 Spoken discourse**

As this thesis is more devoted to a spoken language, the focus of this subchapter is on a spoken discourse. First of all the spoken language will be defined generally. As Widdowson states, the spoken language is seen as an internal part of our everyday existence, so we do not experience it as something separate. We produce language only when we have a reason for using it and such situations occur in our lives daily, for example when we shape and then express our internal thoughts via usage of language for the purpose of communication (2007, 19). Paltridge points out that the way in which the spoken language is used in everyday communication is dependent on the relationship that speakers have, on the frequency of coming to contact together, on the degree of their closeness and on other aspects that differ with every communication (2006, 41).

The language is traditionally divided into spoken and written and a contrast between them can provide better understanding of the spoken discourse. According to Cook, a distinction between the spoken and the written language is in our production and perception of them via senses - in the spoken language we use our mouth and ears while in the written language we apply our eyes and hands (1989, 50). Nevertheless, the difference

is not only in the means of production and perception, but also in a process of production. As Cook states, the spoken language “happens in time, and must therefore be produced and processed ‘on line’” (1989, 115). For this reason Cook also considers an author of the spoken discourse to be more liable for an interruption by a receiver, therefore the spoken discourse is less formal and less planned. However there are some kinds of the spoken discourse which share more values with the written discourse, and therefore are more organized, for example lectures, interviews and trials (1989, 50).

To relate it to the sitcom genre, which is analyzed in this thesis, the sitcom can be considered as a typical example of combination of the spoken and the written discourse. On one hand it is a scripted genre, thus dialogues of characters are written in advance and actors should follow their script and usually do not intervene in it. On the other hand the audience usually listens only to the spoken dialogues (supposing they do not read subtitles); therefore the sitcom can be seen as a genre that belongs to the spoken discourse. Nevertheless, the spoken discourse loses its feature of spontaneity there and the receiver (the audience) is not allowed to interrupt the actors, as the receiver of the spoken discourse usually does.

A usage of the spoken discourse for communicating has many advantages, as Cook points out: “The characteristic features of conversation include greater spontaneity and freedom, and a greater equality among participants than in other discourse types” (1989, 116). Nevertheless as Widdowson states, all pieces of spoken texts become parts of certain conversation only for a short time, so if they are not recorded they disappear immediately after they fulfill their function in the discourse (2007, 7).

Although the spoken language is not usually recorded, thus speakers and receivers cannot get back to their utterances, it is sometimes more easily understandable than the written one due to a usage of a paralanguage, which can help the receiver to identify more with the speaker’s attitude to the given message. According to Widdowson, the paralanguage signifies that author of the utterance does not only produce plain linguistic text, but accompanies his message with various gestures, changes his tone of voice, puts the stress on some words and makes pauses (2007, 8). The paralanguage helps to recognize a context of given situation as subchapter 1.3 defines.

## 1.2 Discourse analysis

According to Gee, a discourse analysis is “analysis of language-in-use whether spoken or written” (2011a, 205). To elaborate on this, Jorgensen and Phillips see the discourse analysis as a broad term with a set of interdisciplinary attitudes that can be applicable for different types of studies and used for examining a lot of various social spheres (2002, 12).

The discourse analysis fulfills several functions. One of them is to observe in detail devices of grammar and their function during the communication (Gee 2011a, 205). The other function, as pointed out by Paltridge, is to consider the usage of language in different cultural and social contexts and investigate what relationship the language and the context share. Then it studies how the use of language is affected by its participants and by relationship between them and how social identities and social relations are influenced by the language (2006, 2). This function of the discourse analysis corresponds with the purpose of the analytical part of this thesis, where the influence of identities of language participants on choice of language and the role of language in constructing participants’ identities are analyzed.

### 1.2.1 Tools for analysis

The objective of the discourse analysis in this thesis is to analyze given data from the perspective of vocabulary, syntax and humor that are used in the transcripts.

#### 1) Vocabulary

The examination of a usage of distinct vocabulary creates an extensive part of the analysis. The analytical part investigates which types of vocabulary are used by the characters in *The Big Bang Theory* and how they influence the construction of the geek identity. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the use of formal versus informal vocabulary, including slang. As *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* states, slang is “very informal, sometimes offensive, language that is used especially by people who belong to a particular group, such as young people”. The analysis also examines the employment of idioms, which are “clusters of words whose meaning cannot be read off their constituent parts” (Simpson 2004, 93), and the use of a terminology, which is defined by *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* as “the technical words or expressions that are used in a particular subject”. The terminology is closely related to jargon, which is defined by the same dictionary as “words and expressions used in a particular profession or by a particular

group of people, which are difficult for other people to understand”. Since the characters of this sitcom are involved in the scientific field and work as scientists, it is expected that they will use scientific terminology and share a professional jargon of the scientists.

## 2) Syntax

*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines the syntax as “the way words are arranged to form sentences or phrases, or the rules of grammar which control this”. The analytical part investigates how the syntax influences the construction of the geek identity, concretely whether the characters tend to use long structures of sentences or not and whether the clarity of their speech is affected by the syntax.

## 3) Humor

The analysis examines how the humor is constructed as a significant feature of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. It investigates whether the main characters of this sitcom known as geeks are presented as funny characters or whether the humor is based on making fun of them. Furthermore, it is analyzed whether the geek characters are aware of humorous effects of their speeches or not. The analysis also focuses on the use of a figurative language that makes utterances humorous, concretely the usage of a pun. Simpson defines the pun as “a form of word-play in which some feature of linguistic structure simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings” (2004, 45).

## 1.3 Context

A context is thought to be a crucial term in the field of discourse analysis, because as Simpson explains, “discourse is context-sensitive” (2004, 7). To give a brief explanation of the term context, Gee says that the context is a background of communication and includes a physical setting in which this communication is present. The context of the spoken discourse also involves participants’ body language, movements and gestures, thus it is created by the manner how we talk, in other words the paralanguage (see 1.1.1.) (2011a, 203).

According to Widdowson the context is exactly defined as “a psychological construct” and “a conceptual representation of a state of affairs” (2007, 22). To understand what the speaker says and what he means by the utterance, the listener should make an essential connection between the language and the shared physical setting. The context of an utterance is not simply the situation where the utterance is realized, but it is composed



of the features of the situation that the participants see as relevant. Yet, in some cases situation aspects do not play much role and the context is rather based on a shared knowledge (Widdowson 2007, 20).

Widdowson explains the shared background knowledge as “the common knowledge of the two people concerned” (2007, 20). It is information that people who already know each other or who talked together previously share. Such participants of the conversation talk in a different way than people who meet for the first time. They tend to make references to what has been explained before and what they share together. To illustrate it, an example from everyday communication will be used. Two friends talk about Mary’s birthday party that will be held tomorrow. One says: “I bought Mary the thing that she has desired for a long time.” The other says: “Great, because I bought her a thing that will match with your present well.” They share background knowledge about Mary’s wish to have a T-shirt with a photo of her favorite singer, therefore without further specification the other person knows what specific present the first person bought.

One of the areas that belong to the field of the shared background knowledge is a shared cultural knowledge. As Gee states, the shared cultural knowledge is the knowledge that people share together when they communicate, supposing they are part of same cultural group. This shared knowledge is usually taken for granted by the participants, although it is difficult to recognize how much of this knowledge each speaker or listener brings to the communication (2011b, 6). It can be illustrated on an example of the cultural group of Czech citizens. It is presupposed that most Czechs know when The Saint Wenceslas’s Day (which is a national holiday) takes place. Therefore, when a Czech person arranges a meeting with other Czech citizens for 28<sup>th</sup> September, this person can only say: “let’s meet on St. Wenceslas’s Day” and all other participants will know the date without any further explanation. Nevertheless, this shared knowledge is applicable only in the same cultural group, because people of different nations would probably not to know the exact dates of Czech national holidays.

To comment on the context of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, it can be said that the characters are involved in various contexts during the seasons. For instance, they share the cultural knowledge of Americans and knowledge of scientists’ subculture and the subculture of sci-fi fans and comics’ fans. Moreover, they share together the background knowledge, because they are friends, work together and spend a lot of time together dedicated to their collective interests.

## 2 PRAGMATICS

Apart from the discourse analysis, the analytical part of this thesis will also draw upon pragmatics. According to Yule, the pragmatics is the linguistic study that examines relationships between people (as users of the language) and linguistic aspects that they create when they communicate. People bring their intended meaning, their presumptions and aims to the communication and create various actions during their speech (1996, 4). Levinson defines the pragmatics as “the study of language usage” (1983, 12) and provides many other definitions from different points of view. In addition, he contrasts it with the field of semantics and says that the pragmatics studies aspects of the context and all the meanings that are encoded in language and are not covered in the semantics (1983, 10). As Yule says, the semantics studies only the relations between linguistic entities and their meanings, but leaves out the importance of their creators (1996, 4). On the contrary, the creators of the language are significant entities in the field of pragmatics.

According to Yule, the pragmatics is concerned with four areas of study. The first one can be seen as a contrast to previous definition of the semantics, because contrarily the pragmatics studies the meaning that people give to their utterances rather than what exactly the words mean in the utterances. Secondly, it studies how the pragmatic meaning of the utterance is influenced by its context as, how someone organizes his or her utterance is dependent on the situation – with whom, where and when he or she speaks. Thirdly, the pragmatics is concerned with additional meaning of the utterance, which is meant by the speaker, but remains unsaid. Although something is not said directly, listeners can often infer this intended meaning of the utterance, and therefore are able to follow a flow of the communication. This point is connected with the fourth perspective of the pragmatics that deals with the listener’s closeness to the speaker (e.g. social or physical) and the amount of the experience that they share. In a particular situation the speaker evaluates the conditions and decides how much has to be said according to his or her distance to the listener (1996, 3).

Yule admits that the pragmatics can be a tricky area of study, because as it was said above, people sometimes need to follow each other’s state of mind to get the exact point of the utterance, which can be complicated. Yet, he adds that people tend to follow regular patterns of behavior when they use language, which helps to realize their intentions (1996, 3). The analytical part of this thesis describes a complexity of language of geek characters and their tendency to repeat exact patterns of behavior when they speak.

## 2.1 Cooperative principle

The previous part explains the pragmatic field of study in general way, however this thesis will focus only on one of the pragmatic principles – the cooperative principle. As Yule points out this principle is generally based on an idea that the cooperation between the participants of the conversation (the speaker and the listener) is crucial for the successful communication. Therefore the listener presupposes not to be confused by the speaker's utterance and should trust the speaker that he or she does not want to mislead him or her (1996, 35).

The cooperative principle was originally introduced by H. Paul Grice in his study called "Logic and Conversation" published in the book *Syntax and Semantics* in 1975. He describes the cooperative principle as follows: "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (1975, 45). He divides the cooperative principle into four maxims – quantity maxim, quality maxim, maxim of relation and maxim of manner.

The quantity maxim indicates how much information will be provided in the conversation and to follow this maxim the speaker should make his or her utterance as informative as the current communication requires and does not provide more or less information than is required. The quality maxim requires saying only the true information, therefore the speaker should not say anything that he or she knows that is false and to claim anything he or she does not have appropriate evidence for. The maxim of relation indicates that the speaker should say only the significant information for the certain communication. Those three maxims are dedicated to *what* is said, unlike the maxim of manner which sees *how* something is said as the most important feature. This maxim of manner urges the speaker to be clear, organized, not to be ambiguous and not to over-explain (Grice 1975, 45-46). Below are examples of each of those maxims, with (a) providing an utterance that sticks to the maxim and (b) that does not observe the maxim:

Quantity maxim: (a) The sign on the bench says: Do not touch, it is painted newly.

(b) The sign on the bench says: Do not touch, it is painted newly, so you could get your hands and clothes dirty. (It is not necessary to specify what will happen, it can be inferred.)

Quality maxim: (a) Paris is the capital of France. (general fact)

(b) Teacher says to her worst student: “You are the best student in the world”. (She uses an irony to point to student’s lack of knowledge)

Maxim of relation: (a) Wife asks her husband what he wants for dinner. He answers: “My favorite beef steak please”.

(b) Wife asks her husband what he wants for dinner. He answers: “I would like to have a new car.” (His answer is irrelevant to the question and to the situation.)

Maxim of manner: (a) Girlfriend asks her boyfriend: “How does my new hairstyle look?” He answers: “It looks pretty good, but it is a bit short.”

(b) Girlfriend asks her boyfriend: “How does my new hairstyle look?” He answers: “It is interesting.”

As the examples indicate, those maxims can often be violated through amount of given information or by usage of irony or sarcasm. The usage of sarcasm is frequent in the sitcom that is analyzed in this thesis, which will be shown in the analytical part of this thesis.

### 3 GEEK IDENTITY

This chapter is dedicated to identity of people known as geeks, which is connected with the theme of this thesis. First of all the term identity will be generally explained and the following part will define the terms geek and nerd and comment on how they are seen by the society.

#### 3.1 Identity

To introduce the following part about the geek identity, the exact meaning of the term identity should be stated. People use the term ‘identity’ every day in a sense when they want to describe their personality and to say other people who they are. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* the term identity means “the qualities and attitudes that a person or group of people have, that make them different from other people”. De Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg contrast this definition with saying that people do not simply ‘have’ the identity, they can rather obtain it through usage of language in interactions and in different contexts (2006, 22). Ivanič supports this idea and says that the identity is constructed in social situations and people are not allowed to choose any identity that they want. Moreover, he says that all types of identities, whether sexual, political or emotional are not only the products of people’s states of minds and aims, but also results of people’s relations to particular possibilities and beliefs that are accessible in their social context (1998, 10, 12).

The identity construction is often connected to person’s perception of his or her own personality as an individual identity or as a member of particular group sharing their habits (de Fina, Schiffrin and Bamberg 2006, 3). Each person can see his or her identity differently and can feel as the individual and as the group member at the same time. As Paltridge says each person can have several identities, which can be realized at the same time or separately during whole life. He provides an example concerning one man that has male identity all his life, but earlier in the life he had the identity as a boy and later as a father, husband and sales manager, when all three identities can be at play at the same time. (2006, 38) This example illustrates the identity as a continuously constructed entity, which depends on an interaction with other people and on recognition of certain identity by other people.

### 3.2 Geek / Nerd

As it constitutes the topic of this thesis, the word ‘geek’ is a crucial term that has to be discussed. Another term ‘nerd’ will be explained as well, because it is closely connected to the term ‘geek’, in fact those words are sometimes seen as synonyms.

As *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* states ‘geek’ is “someone who is not popular because they wear unfashionable clothes, do not know how to behave in social situations, or do strange things”. According to this dictionary the other term ‘nerd’ is defined as “someone who seems only interested in computers and other technical things”. Nerd is thus used more for people fond of information technology and its facilities, thus they are sometimes called ‘computer geeks’.

Those two definitions sometimes overlap, because both geeks and nerds are highly intelligent and share an obsession with specific hobbies, usually connected with science. The usage of those terms gave the basis to their other derivatives, which emerged according to word formation. The following are the most common:

Table 1. Derivatives of the words geek and nerd

	GEEK	NERD
NOUNS	geekdom geekiness	nerdiness nerdishness
ADJECTIVES	geekish geeky – geekier – geekiest	nerdish nerdy – nerdier – nerdiest

(Oxford Dictionaries 2014)

Those words are often used nowadays and as Littmann points out “geekdom is something of a new social phenomenon, and like all new social phenomena, it is regarded in many quarters with a fair amount of suspicion and derision” (2012, 19). The role of this phenomenon is discussed more in the analytical part of this thesis. The analysis also deals with further explanation of how geek/nerd identity is constructed and what is typical for it. What the creator of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, Bill Prady personally says about the geeks is that “the point of these characters is, you can be the smartest people in the world and you're still an outsider” (Jurgensen 2008, 5).

## 4 SITCOM

A situation comedy – in short a sitcom, a specific genre of the discourse – is a format of television series, which emerged for the first time in the USA and in Britain in the half of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Slunčák 2010, 9). Later, it started to develop in other countries and became one of the most popular TV genres, displacing most of other kinds of video comedy (Berman 1987, 6). Nowadays various sitcoms are created all around the world, thus when one switches on TV it is probable that some sitcom is broadcasting. Since people are fond of this genre, sitcom creators release more and more new sitcoms with diverse themes and characters. As Creeber, Miller and Tulloch point out the “situation comedy is one of the staples of mature broadcast television” (2008, 78).

Although this genre emerged in the USA and in Britain approximately at the same time and their production of sitcoms shares similar principles, there are some differences between American and British sitcoms. Creeber, Miller and Tulloch admit that the main difference is its length, because the US sitcoms are usually broadcasted much longer than the British ones. While the British sitcoms usually have only about 6 episodes, the American sitcoms tend to have about 20 episodes and more (2008, 86). As this thesis analyzes the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, this chapter will discuss the sitcom genre broadcasted in the USA.

As Slunčák defines, generally the sitcom genre is defined as a half an hour format; however each episode lasts only approximately 22 to 28 minutes depending on the number of inserted adverts. Unlike other TV forms, sitcoms are usually set up only in a few settings, commonly three or four, such as home, workplace and restaurant. The sitcom genre is unusual with its kind of predictability, because every episode is created according to a pattern, which is strictly followed and therefore spectators know what they can expect from each episode. All episodes should follow certain style and creators should avoid changes of this style to prevent spectator’s disappointment (2010, 9). To support this idea of a sitcom pattern, Creeber, Miller and Tulloch add that spectator can usually discover such pattern or frame of US sitcoms during the first season and then this frame is only further developed in following seasons (2008, 86).

The sitcom, as a part of video comedy genre, shares many similarities with a movie, yet there are differences as well. For instance spectators consider different features of each genre as the most important. As Slunčák states, while the movie is described by spectators according to its plot and setting, the sitcom is dedicated more to a group of characters,

which creates a base of the sitcom, and also to situations which the characters should deal with. Moreover, the sitcom's style of arrangement is dissimilar to a movie. Its style is closer to a theatre, because the sitcom is usually filmed in front of a live audience, so it is usual to hear a real laugh or clapping of hands in each episode (2010, 11, 22). Therefore the sitcom audience gets to closer contact with the characters and has a chance to support them by applause.

As it has been said above, characters create significant part of sitcoms, because the main component of storytelling in the sitcom is a form of dialogue between characters. Each of those characters has his or her original personality with specific traits that creators allocated to them. The main characteristics typical for the character should be kept during all seasons; however each character has a possibility for personal development (Slunčák 2010, 9). Berman says that whole sitcom should relate to its spectators, therefore its "characters are supposed to resemble and to represent the audience" (1987, 6). It means that a spectator wants to watch characters that he or she can identify with, in situations that he or she knows and in which he or she can imagine how characters feel. Therefore when producers want to have a popular sitcom they should create appealing characters that will attract spectators to watch them again and again. According to Taflinger the situation comedy incorporates three diverse types of characters – main, supporting and transient. In a sitcom there could be only one main character, but it is more frequent to have 4 to 6 main characters. The main character is the most significant person, because he or she takes part in majority of actions. To create a kind of a foil for the main character and to provide him a support, the supporting character is introduced. Unlike a transient, the supporting character belongs to members of a regular cast. The transient character is used frequently in a form of a guest star, who is involved in some problematic situation as part of the main plot of a single episode. This guest star can be a real celebrity, playing himself or herself, or any actor playing a major role in one episode (1996).

#### **4.1 *The Big Bang Theory***

The unique idea for a brand new sitcom appeared in heads of two television skilled writers and producers, Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady. After their previous success with other comedy series like *Two and a Half Men* (Lorre's work) and *Gilmore Girls* (Prady's work) they wanted to create something unusual that will interest majority of an audience (Jurgensen 2008). They took a risk with creating an extraordinary sitcom with scientific background



about a geek community, called *The Big Bang Theory*. Luckily it had a great success (see chapter 4.1.1) and started an obsession with ‘geeky’ accessories, such as T-shirts with scientific signs, and renewed a popularity of traditional comics and sci-fi films.

The creators also based the popularity of this sitcom on additional details of the series. These include a catchy theme song called “The History of Everything”, written and performed by the Canadian rock band Barenaked Ladies. It has become well-known and well fits in this sitcom, because its lyrics that describe the development of the universe are as complicated and fast as the flow of ideas of the main characters often is. Another interesting detail is hidden under each episode title that contains ‘geeky’ expressions. As Amy Rickman notes, “the episode titles always start ‘The...’ followed by two-word phrase summing up the plot,” which often contain words that resemble scientific terms, such as reconfiguration, segmentation, postulate, and many more (2011, 71).

To briefly introduce the plot, *The Big Bang Theory* series tells a story about two brilliant scientists, Sheldon and Leonard, with high IQ degree, who share a flat in an apartment building and also work together as physicists. They have other two friends, Howard and Rajesh, who are also scientists and their only friends. They all live their common ‘geeky’ lives until a new gorgeous neighbor Penny moves into a flat opposite to Sheldon’s and Leonard’s flat. All members of this ‘geek group’ (except for Sheldon) are interested in Penny’s beauty and start to flirt with her, but nobody is successful (except for Leonard in later episodes). They often go to a restaurant, where Penny works, start to help each other and have fun together with Penny. They become friends with her, although they have almost nothing in common. This connection of totally opposite identities is the main source of humor and of crucial twists in the plot through all the seasons. The cast is accompanied by microbiologist Bernadette in the third season and by neuroscientist Amy in the fifth season.

Due to a scientific background of its characters, this show is full of scientific terms that are sometimes hardly understandable for average audience. Rickman points out that although people do not always know what the actors talk about, the creators of this sitcom Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady are particular about the scientific accuracy of all dialogues concerning some kind of science. Due to this, it was necessary to hire a skilled scientific person who would help with the dialogues. Therefore David Saltzberg, an experienced astrophysicist, joined the team of creators without any further experience in television (2011, 200-01). Despite his unskilled beginnings in television business, he was able to

prove other skills, which were (and still are) crucial for the high quality of this sitcom. He is responsible not only for writing scientific dialogues, but also for finding scientific terms that fit into certain situation the best. He also creates all complicated calculations, which are written mainly by Sheldon on his whiteboard at home or at his office (Jurgensen 2008).

#### **4.1.1 Popularity of *The Big Bang Theory***

The American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is one of the most popular and one of the fastest growing television series of recent times. This statement is supported by the fact that its first episode “The Pilot” had very good ratings of 9.75 million viewers and the ratings hit 11 million viewers during the second season. Moreover, these ratings get higher and higher with each other season. By the fourth season, it was the US’s highest rated comedy overall and beat another popular sitcom *Two and a Half Men* completely (Rickman 2011, 194-95).

*The Big Bang Theory* was first released in 2007 and since that time, its popularity has grown fast. There is almost nobody who does not know this exceptional sitcom. Due to its good reviews from viewers, its creators carry on releasing more and more episodes. In autumn 2013 the seventh season of this series started to broadcast on a TV channel CBS, which is its home channel. Furthermore, in March 2014 the CBS confirmed on its website the speculations of the fans of this series and released information about a prolongation of the sitcom to at least another three seasons.

## **II. ANALYSIS**

## 5 DESCRIPTION OF THE CORPUS AND METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Corpus material

The corpus consists of transcriptions of two seasons of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Two selected seasons, the first season and the last completed season (season 6), have been chosen to give a general overview of the sitcom's language and of its characters. The objective of the analysis is to examine what discursive devices contribute to the construction of identities of the sitcom's geek characters. Although there are four geek characters in the sitcom, the analytical part is focused only on three of them – Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and on their friend Penny, to demonstrate a contrast between them. The fourth geek Rajesh is not included in the analysis, because he does not get an adequate space in the script to be analyzed, due to his inability to talk in woman's presence. As the corpus material is based on the characters of this sitcom, they will be briefly introduced here.

Sheldon Cooper works as a theoretical physicist at Caltech University and has high IQ score – about 187. He lives with his best friend Leonard Hofstadter in an apartment in Pasadena, California. Although he has been seen as an asexual man, he starts a relationship with woman in the fifth season, neuroscientist Amy Farrah Fowler. Sheldon has many curious habits and characteristic traits, thus he is considered as the geekiest character of the sitcom as the analysis illustrates. Moreover, he is the main character of the sitcom, thus the analytical part focuses mainly on him.

Leonard Hofstadter is an experimental physicist at the same university as Sheldon Cooper, at Caltech University. He is Sheldon's roommate and friend and they share the same interests. Leonard goes through significant development during the seasons, mainly due to an impact of his neighbor Penny. They have an unusual relationship together and they alternately date each other and break up.

Howard Wolowitz works as an aerospace engineer at Caltech University and he is the only geek character without a PhD degree. He is working on projects for NASA and in the sixth season he becomes an astronaut and flies to space. Although Howard is a mature man, he still lives with his mother and has a huge interest in beautiful women in the first season. Nevertheless this situation changes when he meets Bernadette and they become a married couple in the sixth season. Due to this relationship, he experiences an essential change of his behavior and becomes more self-sufficient.

Penny is the only character, whose surname is not mentioned during all six seasons. She is an attractive blonde woman, who grew up on a farm in Omaha, Nebraska. She works as a waitress in the Cheesecake Factory, although she has come into California to become an actress. She is a neighbor of Sheldon and Leonard; therefore she has a significant impact on their strange geeky world and creates an opposite character to them due to her good social skills. Their contrasting identities are created via their behavior and language, which are analyzed and compared in the analytical part.

## 5.2 Methodology

The analytical part deals with transcriptions of dialogues, which have been made by the author of this thesis. The official DVDs of *The Big Bang Theory Season 1* and *The Big Bang Theory Season 6* have been used as materials for the transcriptions. When giving examples from the sitcom in the analysis, the characters are marked only with the first letters of their names. The examples are followed by brackets, in which the number of the season, the number of the episode and the time when the dialogue emerged are stated.

This thesis mainly employs the discourse analysis of the corpus material, where non-language aspects and language aspects of the construction of the geek identity are analyzed. Moreover, the analysis of the discourse is accompanied by the analysis of one of the principles of the pragmatic field – the cooperative principle.

## 6 CONSTRUCTION OF GEEK IDENTITY

The analytical part focuses on an examination of features that create the geek identity. Those features or aspects are divided into non-language and language ones. The typical geeky clothes, interests, characteristics and their behavior belong to the non-language aspects and choice of vocabulary, usage of syntax and humorous effects that their utterances provoke belong to the language aspects.

### 6.1 Non-language aspects

All geeks in this sitcom share many characteristics that help to construct their specific identity. One of them is their unusual choice of clothing, which indicates their awkwardness at first sight. Authors of this sitcom assigned each geek character a certain pattern of clothing that they follow during all seasons. This clothing can be characterized as unfashionable clothes that do not match well together, however by not following a modern stream it expresses the originality of its possessor. Generally it can be said that Howard is the character with the most original but also eccentric clothes. His clothes are mainly in bright colors; he always wears a turtleneck and obtains a huge collection of conspicuous belt buckles, where many of them are decorated with geeky motives. Sheldon's choice of clothes is also influenced by his interests, because he wears T-shirts with motives from science field or comics and always has on another long-sleeved T-shirt under the short-sleeved one following a given pattern of clothing. Although Leonard is not as visible for his clothes as other characters are, he wears glasses that are stereotypically seen as the most typical accessory for all geeks.

The geek characters do not exactly fit in a common image of young men not only for their appearance, but mainly for their range of interests. They are fond of collecting comics with animated heroes, toys inspired by those comics and costumes of heroes from sci-fi films. They dedicate their leisure time to playing various geeky games such as 3D Chess (a classic chess played on boards one above another), Rock Paper Scissors Lizard Spock (a variation on a well-known game played with hands, Rock-Paper-Scissors) and Trestling (a combination of PC game Tetris and a real wrestling, which connects two abilities – a mental and a physical strength). In addition to these games, they are also fond of video games and PC games, mainly with magical and sci-fi themes. When there is a struggle between Leonard and Howard in the episode “The Pork Chop Indeterminacy” (S01E15),

they use a video game battle (a boxing fight) as a tool for solving their conflict, which can be seen as an unusual behavior for adult people.

This leads to another aspect of the characters' visible geekiness, which is their absence of the physical strength. Their appearance indicates that they do not practice any sport, thus they prefer virtual battles or rather verbal battles with the aid of their own intelligence. This characteristic is illustrated in the episode "The Middle Earth Paradigm" (S01E06), where Leonard has an argument with Penny's boyfriend Kurt, who represents a typical 'macho' man preferring a physical fight. Leonard is aware of his inability to beat Kurt physically; therefore he decides to beat him logically with his high IQ. Kurt leaves the battle feeling ashamed after his inability to spell a word 'confrontation'.

Furthermore, the geeks might be generally characterized as strange people because of their social isolation from the surrounding world. All four geeks in this sitcom work at the University, which is a place full of people. Nevertheless, the geek characters are socially passive and do not communicate with other people except for themselves most of the time at work. All of them have their separated offices, where they work on their researches and experiments, which is a solitary activity, and thus there is not a necessity to cooperate with someone else. Due to their restricted social circle, they are not used to an effective communicating and might be seen as slightly socially retarded by people who do not know them. Therefore they prefer an online chatting with unknown people with similar interests. The geeks are not confident in direct conversations and do not have enough social skills to chat simply, thus their communication is complicated and sometimes unintelligible. In the example (1) Leonard provides Sheldon with a piece of advice how to chat effectively, although he knows it only theoretically and he and all other geeks are not able to hide their geeky language during the speech, which is analyzed in the following subchapter.

(1) S: Chat? We don't chat. At least not offline.

L: Well it's not difficult, you just listen to what she says and then you say something appropriate in response. (S01E01; 04:55 – 05:05)

The social awkwardness of geeky characters is contrasted with Penny's ordinary life and good social skills during all seasons. Unlike them, Penny has got many friends and is able to communicate effectively almost with every personality. She works in completely different conditions, because she has to cooperate with her colleagues and mainly deal with huge variety of customers. Penny's beautiful appearance contributes to her popularity

among good-looking men and contrasts with geeks' oddness in a dressing and in their inability to attract women. She is also interested in completely different free time activities, which are common for young people such as dancing, sports and shopping. Unlike geeks' interest in IT technologies, Penny is not familiarized with advanced functions of PCs and uses her own laptop only for chatting and surfing on the Internet. Due to all those facts, she creates the opposite character to the geek identity. The usage of her language is contrasted with the geeky one in the following subchapter.

## **6.2 Language aspects**

### **6.2.1 Content of the geek characters' speech**

The geek characters usually talk about different themes than the non-geek ones, although some similar topics can be found as well (such as women). The themes typical only for the geek characters in the sitcom are for example the science, the technology, the sci-fi films, the comics and the geeky games (see 6.1). All these topics contribute to construction of the geek identity of the characters.

### **6.2.2 Vocabulary**

#### **6.2.2.1 Formal choice of vocabulary**

The language that the geeks use does not seem to be the language of ordinary young men known from current TV broadcasting. Although they sometimes use a colloquial language as well, their choice of vocabulary is rather formal than informal. Their language is influenced by the University environment, which is academic and requires formal speech and behavior. In addition, geeks' high IQ predetermines them to have a high standard of language and extensive knowledge of vocabulary. Therefore they sometimes use words that are not common in colloquial speech and their utterances seem to be complicated and not clear. The following list is arranged in the alphabetical order and contains examples of verbs, adjectives and phrases that the geek characters tend to use when they speak.

- an anguish => suffering
- a callous egomaniac => extremely self-confident heartless person
- a carbohydrate delivery system => speaking about supply of cheesecakes in the  
Cheesecake Factory
- a coitus => sexual intercourse



- counterpoint => on the contrary
- a cylindrical container => a glass in shape of cylinder
- the dark crescent-shaped patterns under arms => sweaty stains under arms
- to disseminate => to spread out
- a documented propensity => someone tends to do something and everybody knows about it
- an epistemic ambivalence => state of knowing and not knowing at the same time
- an ethical conundrum => moral problem
- a formula => idea, plan
- I accept your premise => I take it into account
- a mental competence => ability of mind
- a modification of colleague/friendship paradigm => to change a colleague/friendship model of relationship
- an organizational paradigm => manner of organization
- a pictographic representation => portrayal of something by pictures
- preposterous => meaningless
- reductio-ad-absurdum => indirect proof
- a scientific inaccuracy => scientifically incorrect
- a sort of unconscious emotional turmoil => an emotional chaos that the individual has not been aware of
- a valid hypothesis => a right theory

The use of formal language presents the geek characters as knowledgeable and intelligent people that are able to use huge variety of formal words, which helps to evoke respect among people of same intelligence. On the other hand, their speech can lead to incomprehension among their peers and people of lower intelligence. Moreover, they can also seem to be a bit emotionless, in contrast to Penny, whose speech is more emotive (as shown in 6.2.5).

#### **6.2.2.2 Idioms**

The usage of idioms creates significant part of the geeks' language as is indicated in the selected examples below. The idioms allow the geek characters to point out their

knowledge of language, because a correct usage of idioms is not easy and requires from the speaker to know their exact meanings and to be able to use them in an appropriate situation. The idioms in the examples are accompanied by their approximate meaning, which is derived from the context.

- (2) L: Okay, well, *make yourself at home*. (meaning: make yourself comfortable here) (context: Leonard welcomes Penny in his apartment) (S01E01; 06:26)
- (3) H: Let me offer a little *outside the box thinking* here, why doesn't Christie stay with me. (meaning: thinking from different perspective) (context: the characters discuss where Christie should stay) (S01E07; 12:24 – 12:28)
- (4) H: *I'm game*. (meaning: I am with you, I want to do it) (context: Howard's agreement with the journey suggested by Sheldon) (S01E10; 12:51)
- (5) S: And if they ever come out with a game called Words with People You Once Worked With, *you'll be off to the races*. (meaning: you will be busy) (context: Sheldon talks about Howard's past cooperation with Stephen Hawking) (S06E06; 01:43 – 01:47)
- (6) L: Hey, will you steam my uniform next?  
S: Interesting. Do you recall this conversation? Leonard, want to go half seas on a steamer? No, Sheldon, we don't need a steamer. *Looks like that rumples chickens come home to roost*. (meaning: you have to face consequences of your bad choice or mistake) (context: they prepare their costumes for a meeting with comics fans) (S06E13; 00:01 – 00:15)
- (7) S: I read his research, and, it's *leaps and bounds* ahead of mine. Which means the mommy of the smartest physicist at the university is not my mommy as I had thought. It's his mommy. (meaning: rapid progress) (context: Sheldon is upset due to his colleague's better results) (S06E14; 09:10 – 09:25)
- (8) S: Yes, it's six against one. *Stand down*, sir. (meaning: to move away) (context: Sheldon is afraid of Howard's angry reaction) (S06E19; 12:28 – 12:30)
- (9) L: Well, I'm sure you have a lot of good applicants, I just wanted to say hi and let you know that *I'll be throwing my hat in the ring*. (meaning: I will participate)

(context: Leonard tries to obtain a permanent employment by convincing one member of committee) (S06E20; 07:21 – 07:34)

(10) S: No, no. No, *I learned my lesson*. I understand that was inappropriate. (meaning: to learn from previous experience) (context: Sheldon apologizes for his previous inappropriate behavior to his superior) (S06E20; 18:35 – 18:39)

### 6.2.2.3 Terminology

Since the geeky characters are fond of science and they are surrounded by it constantly, their utterances are affected by it and a science terminology can be often found in the transcripts. They use, for example, names of well-known experiments, names of scientific elements or technical tools. The usage of terminology reflects their knowledge of the science field, helps to construct them as smart people and makes the conversation with other geeks much easier, because there is not a necessity to explain the terms. Nevertheless, the geeks are not aware of the fact that everyone does not have to share their knowledge and they are surprised that their utterances need further explanation for non-geeks, which indirectly reveals their lack of empathy. Some examples of scientific terminology that the geek characters use are provided below.

- the Quantum mechanics
- the Born-Oppenheimer approximation
- the Mandelbrot set
- the Swirling vortex of Entropy
- the Hubble Telescope
- the Carpal tunnel syndrome
- the Light year
- the Schrodinger's cat
- the Higgs boson
- the CAD/CAM designs
- the atomic force microscope
- the front-projected holographic display combined with the laser-based finger cracking

#### 6.2.2.4 *Geek / Nerd*

Usage of the words *geek* and *nerd* by members of the group of geeks indicates that they are aware of their own type of identity and they are not ashamed of it. They know how the *geek* identity is perceived by their surrounding, more specifically, that other people see them as odd characters that do not fit into society, as the following example (11) indicates (moreover see example 29).

- (11) L: Uh, we're going to the Comic-Con in Bakersfield. They have a big costume contest. It's cooler than it sounds. (context: The *geek* characters have travelled to a meeting of comics fans, unfortunately somebody has stolen their car. A policeman, who investigates a theft of their car talks with Leonard, who depreciates a quality of this meeting to convince the policeman that their interest is not as strange as it looks.) (S06E13; 16:27 – 16:34)

The word *nerd* is also used by the authors of this sitcom in a name of one episode in the first season - "The *Nerdvana* Annihilation". This title refers to geeks' satisfaction with their life in a *geek* community, because the word *nerdvana* is a blending of words *nerd* and *nirvana*, i.e. state of bliss to be the *nerd* (or the *geek*). Nevertheless, their *nerdvana* is partly destructed in this episode as the word *annihilation* reveals. The following examples indicate how the geeks use those two words.

- (12) H: He's kind of a *nerd*. (He is talking about Raj and his inability to talk with beautiful women.) (S01E01; 17:29)
- (13) S: Well, at least now you can retrieve the black box from the twisted smoldering wreckage that was once your fantasy of dating her, and analyze the data so that you don't crash into *geek* mountain again. (S01E03; 04:04 – 04:13)
- (14) H: Hola, *nerd*-migos. (This greeting refers to Sheldon, Leonard and Raj.) (S01E07; 10:55)
- (15) H: Forget the parties? What a *nerd*. (He says that to Leonard, who gives a preference to scientific conference instead of a party.) (S01E09; 04:35)

### 6.2.2.5 *Foreign vocabulary*

This subchapter is dedicated to Howard's interest in foreign languages that creates part of his geek identity. He is able to speak many foreign languages, which indicates his intelligence although he does not own the PhD degree as the other geeks do. This can be a reason why he uses foreign languages in common conversations – to demonstrate an ability that the other geeks do not have. He also speaks in different language when he wants to impress Penny and other pretty women during the first season of the sitcom. After he is married in the sixth season, he restricts the usage of foreign languages, because he does not need to attract women, but still is able to imitate Rajesh's Indian accent perfectly.

In the examples (16) and (17), Howard uses French, because this language is usually associated with love and romance. Therefore he wants to be seen as a great lover available for sexual relationship and to attract women via usage of French.

(16) H: Enchanté Mademoiselle. (greeting in French) (S01E01; 14:38)

(17) H: Bon douche. (wish for a good shower in French) (S01E01; 14:58)

(18) H: Hola, nerd-migos. (greeting in Spanish) (S01E07; 10:55)

(19) H: Ты очень красивая девушка (speaks a phrase in Russian).

P: I'm sorry?

H: Haven't you ever been told how beautiful you are in flawless Russian? (S01E02; 01:21 – 01:28)

### 6.2.3 **Syntax**

When the geeks communicate with other characters, they tend to be wordy, over-explanatory and their speech is sometimes confusing (mainly for the non-geek characters). Due to their choice of vocabulary, as described in the previous subchapter, their speech is not clear for everyone and it is sometimes very difficult to understand what they say. The following examples indicate that mainly Sheldon has a problem with expressing his thoughts in simple sentences and uses long structures instead.

(20) S: Yes, it tells us that you participate in the mass cultural delusion that the Sun's apparent position relative to arbitrarily defined constellations and the time of your birth somehow affects your personality. (S01E01; 09:17 – 09:25)

(21) S: I don't guess. As a scientist I reach conclusions based on observation and experimentation, although as I'm saying this it occurs to me you may have been employing a rhetorical device rendering my response moot. (S01E10; 01:46 – 01:57)

Unlike Sheldon's speech, Leonard usually speaks simpler and divides his utterances into short sentences, to make his speech more understandable. Nevertheless, when Leonard talks with women and tries to explain his thoughts without preparation, he tends to be nervous and his nervousness is reflected in the structure of his speech. In those situations, his speech loses consistency, therefore his utterances are ambiguous, poorly structured and sometimes do not make sense (as the following examples indicate). The example (24) shows that Leonard uses long structures of sentences as well. Especially when he wants to provide an explanation or express his thoughts he is not able to speak simply.

(22) L: I know you won't look, why would you look, there's nothing to see, well, not nothing.... (S01E09; 07:38 – 07:40)

(23) L: Yeah, no, I do, I use those... uh... just to polish up my... spear-fishing equipment. I spear fish. When I'm not crossbow hunting, I spear fish. (S01E15; 05:48 – 06:02)

(24) L: Well, I did have a poppy seed bagel for breakfast, which could give a positive urine test for opiates but certainly not dilate my pupils, so I guess there's no point in bringing it up. (S01E05; 06:40 – 06:49)

The geek characters' use of long structures of the sentences points to their inability to express themselves in a simple way and to their tendency to provide as much information as possible, at the expense of intelligibility of their utterances. Those attributes contribute to the construction of the characters' geek identity.

#### **6.2.4 Humor**

This sitcom is based on an idea that we are supposed to laugh with geeks, but not to make fun of them. In other words, the objective of this sitcom is not to mock the geeks, but to show their personalities from a positive point of view for the purpose of making people interested in their lives. Nevertheless, the humor is still the main feature of this sitcom,

because the geeks often get into humorous situations due to their high intelligence and strange hobbies, although they do not intentionally want to be humorous and do not realize the humorous effect. The following examples show those situations, where the geeks are not joking deliberately.

In the example (25) Howard praises his own abilities as being the engineer and then when reparation of elevator is needed, he only tries to push the elevator button and gives up the reparation when nothing happens. The same demonstration of praising is shown in the example (26) where Leonard points out to their high intelligence and then realizes that young girls are smarter than they are. Those examples points to the geeks' self-confidence in their abilities and knowledge, but at the same time to their inability to use their theoretical knowledge in practice.

(25) H: Not necessary, I have masters in engineering; I remotely repair satellites on a regular basis. I troubleshoot space shuttle payloads. When the Mars rover started pulling to the left I performed a front end alignment from 62 million miles away. (Presses lift button. Nothing happens.) No, that baby's broken. (S01E05; 03:26 – 03:55)

(26) L: Come on, we have a combined IQ of 360, we should be able to figure out how to get into a stupid building.

(Two girl scouts arrive carrying bags of cookies. One runs her hand down the intercom, pushing all the buttons. The door is buzzed open.)

S: What do you think their combined IQ is? (S01E01; 18:28 – 18:39)

The examples (27) and (28) show how the humor is based on the geekiness of the characters. In the example (27) Howard and Raj think that they look great when they are dancing, nevertheless Leonard sees how ridiculous they look and says it to them although they do not take him seriously. Their self-confidence in their abilities is one of the attributes that help to construct the geek identity. The example (28) reveals Howard's geeky interest in collecting of cards for children, which provokes humorous effect, because he is adult. Nevertheless, this interest is one of the aspects that help to construct his geek identity. The context of the example (29) is based on geeks' journey to a meeting of comic fans and for this purpose they all are dressed in Star Trek costumes. After their car is stolen, Sheldon does not want to stop another car, because he is afraid of crazy people. Due

to his oddness, he does not realize that rather they all (dressed in costumes) look like crazy people. His inability to see obvious facts and their interest in costumes points to their geekiness.

(27) H: Yeah, I wish we looked as cool dancing in clubs as we do right now.

L: Don't worry, this is exactly how you look when you're dancing in clubs. (S06E06; 00:18 – 00:26)

(28) H: Yes. And can you please make that out to Bernadette? I was taken off the joint account until I learn the value of money.

R: Wow, that's harsh.

H: Tell me about it.

R: Aren't you gonna eat lunch?

H: Nah, I blew my food allowance on Pokemon cards. (S06E14; 18:08 – 18:26)

(29) S: Maybe we're better off. What if we were to get in a car with a crazy person?

L: Look at us, Sheldon. We're the crazy people. (S06E13; 10:22 – 10:30)

One of the ways that contribute to the construction of the geek identity of the characters is the use of geeky jokes, as shown in the following examples (30) and (31). In the example (30) Leonard says scientific joke, therefore Howard and Raj laugh. Nevertheless Penny does not laugh, because she does not understand it, although she pretends that she already knows it. Similar situation is shown in the example (31) where Leonard provides time travel joke and only Sheldon is aware of its humorous effect.

(30) L: 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. (Raj and Howard laugh.) Right?

P: Oh, sorry, I've just, I've heard it before. (S01E09; 13:12 – 13:46)

(31) L: Hey, if you wait for us to set up the time machine, I can drop you off at work yesterday. Time travel joke, it's not... never mind.

S: For what it's worth, I thought it was humorous. (S01E14; 04:54 – 05:06)



The geeks' jokes also reveal their high intelligence, because the characters use knowledge of figurative language to make their utterances humorous. In the example (32) Sheldon uses figurative language via applying a pun, which is based on words with similar sounds and this play with words has a humorous effect. Sheldon uses a phrase *set phasers to fun*, which is an analogue to a phrase *set phasers to stun*, a phrase frequently used in his favorite Star Trek movies. In the example (33) Howard uses an analogue of proverb *find a penny, pick it up, all day long, you'll have good luck* and makes it humorous due to a similarity of noun *penny* and a name of Penny, to whom he says it.

(32) S: Hello, I'm Dr. Sheldon Cooper. Welcome to Sheldon Cooper Presents Fun with Flags. Before we get started, I'd like to announce the winner of our design your own flag competition. But I can't. The only entry was from GameyGamer75, and I know that was a jpeg of your buttocks. Now this week we have a very special episode where we explore the flags of the popular entertainment franchise, Star Trek. And to help me, I'm pleased to introduce Internet personality, former star of Star Trek: The Next Generation, and the only guy I know lucky enough to be immortalized in one sixteenth scale. *Set phasers to fun* for my friend, Wil Wheaton. (S06E07; 00:01 – 00:50)

(33) H: See a Penny, pick her up, and all the day you'll have good luck. (S01E07; 01:09 – 01:13)

### 6.2.5 Penny's language

The objective of this thesis is to describe the discursive construction of the geek identity and moreover to compare it with the non-geek identity, which is represented by Penny in this sitcom. As it is demonstrated below, her language is much more colloquial, informal and also simpler. She does not over-explain and does not use long sentences as the geeks do. Her speech is enthusiastic and emotive and she often exaggerates her expressions, unlike geeks who are organized and speak directly to the point. Moreover she overuses slang words and informal expressions, which sometimes combine with insults, portraying her as not a very sophisticated person. Due to her colloquial language and lack of usage of formal words, Penny does not appear to be as intelligent as the geeks are; in addition, her lower IQ is visible also in the content of her speech. She is more likely to chat about ordinary topics typical for women (such as fashion, celebrities and gossip) than to have a

discussion on scientific methods with the geeks. The following examples demonstrate typical words that Penny tends to use and that differentiate her speech from the geeks' one.

**Greeting:** *hey; hi*

**Addressing:** *guys; fellas; sweetie; honey*

**Expressing agreement:** *yeah; yep!*

**Expressing surprise:** *gosh; holy smokes; whoa!; what the hell*

**Enthusiastic words:** *nice; sweet; cool; adorable; amazing; hot; I'd love to; LOL* (sms language)

**Words for extraordinary:** *creepy; weird; weirdo*

**Expletives/Insults:** *ass; jerk; son of a bitch; damn; shuddup*

**Slang expressions:** *yakkety-yakking* (to babble); *pick up* (to make casual acquaintance in means of sexual relationship); *a kick-ass surprise party* (great surprise party)

**Informal phrases:** *to dial it down* (to control); *to change/ get changed* (change clothes); *you're kidding* (you are joking); *to get your ass handed to you* (to defeat someone); *what's the deal?* (what is going on?); *got it?* (is that clear?)

**Syntax:** *gonna* (going to); *what ya doing?* (what are you doing?)

#### 6.2.5.1 Penny's humor

A humorous effect of Penny's utterances has different basis than in the geeks' case, because Penny says jokes deliberately. She is able to realize situations that are suitable for certain jokes and that is the reason why her statements often have the humorous effects, unlike geeks, who are often funny rather for saying something that does not fit to certain situation than for utterances that are pointed precisely.

Her favorite type of humor is making fun of other people; therefore she can sometimes seem to be cruel and rude. Due to Sheldon's oddness, he is the most frequent object of Penny's joking, as the following examples indicate.

(34) S: Who do I speak to about permanently reserving this table?

P: Um, I don't know a psychiatrist? (S01E05; 18:36 – 18:42)

(35) S: Okay, that's it, I don't know how, but she is cheating. No-one can be that attractive and be this skilled at a video game.

P: Wait, wait, Sheldon, come back, you forgot something.

S: What?

P: This plasma grenade. (Explosion) Ha! Look, it's raining you! (Penny is making fun of his defeat in video game) (S01E07; 04:40 – 04:56)

(36) A: Ooh, I do love a bad boy.

P: As evidenced by your boyfriend and his fear of hamsters. (S06E13; 07:26 – 07:33)

Penny is also the main representative of a user of sarcasm and irony that create a significant part of humor in this sitcom. The example (37) shows how she uses irony to answer Leonard's question. This ironic utterance is humorous, because everybody who knows Leonard is aware of his poor sexual abilities. In addition, the example (38) indicates how Penny uses the sarcasm and the humorous effect of her comment is multiplied by Sheldon's inability to realize the sarcasm. The examples (34) and (36) above also illustrate Penny's ability to use irony in humorous way.

(37) L: Is my coitus whimsically inventive?

P: That is what I write on the bathroom walls. For a whimsically inventive time, call Leonard Hofstadter.

L: I know you're joking, but I'd be okay with that. (S06E14; 16:00 – 16:13)

(38) P: In my apartment, while I was sleeping.

S: And snoring. And that's probably just a sinus infection, but it could be sleep apnoea, you might want to see an otolaryngologist. It's a throat doctor.

P: And what kind of doctor removes shoes from asses?

S: Depending on the depth, that's either a proctologist or a general surgeon. (Leonard holds up a paper with the word "Sarcasm") Oh! (S01E02; 12:36–13:08)

As illustrated in the examples above, the geek characters' identity usually creates subject of Penny's humor. Although she makes fun of their geekiness and their strange interests, she does not intend to be cruel to them and to mock them intentionally. This positive attitude of humor follows from the idea of whole sitcom – to laugh with geeks but not to mock them. The humor of this sitcom is also based on the usage of irony; however there is a difference between Penny's ironic utterances and the geeks' ones. Penny deliberately uses the irony to make her utterances humorous, while the geek characters

provide ironic comments mainly for the original purpose of the irony – to express an absurdity of certain situation. The difference between humor of the non-geek character (Penny) and the geek characters illustrates the contrast of those identities, which helps to emphasize the characteristics of the geek identity.

## 7 COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

This part is dedicated to pragmatics and to the cooperative principle. The examples below illustrate how the characters of the sitcom unintentionally do not observe or intentionally flout the four maxims of this principle and how those discursive means contribute to the construction of the geek identity of the characters.

### 7.1 Maxim of quantity

Geek characters often do not observe the maxim of quantity, because they tend to be over-explanatory when they are nervous or when they want to reveal their knowledge, thus they provide more information than it is required. The examples of providing less information are also available, but they are not as typical for geek's speech as the over-explanatory ones.

In the example (39) Leonard provides too much unnecessary information due to his nervousness, thus he unintentionally does not observe the maxim of quantity. The nervousness during communicating with beautiful women points to geeks' typical lack of social skills. The conversation in the example (40) shows how Sheldon violates the maxim of quantity, because he intentionally provides longer answer than Penny's question requires. As Howard's comment shows, such long explanations are usual in Sheldon's case and his friends are aware of them. Sheldon usually does not observe the maxim of quantity when he wants to reveal his knowledge and to familiarize his friend with some facts, although they are not interested in them. This behavior points out his self-confidence in own intelligence.

(39) L: Anyway, um. We brought home Indian food. And, um. I know that moving can be stressful, and I find that when I'm undergoing stress, that good food and company can have a comforting effect. Also, curry is a natural laxative, and I don't have to tell you that, uh, a clean colon is just one less thing to worry about. (S01E01; 05:16 – 05:40)

(40) P: Uh, Sheldon, I didn't see your present.

S: That's because I didn't bring one.

P: Well why not?

H: Don't ask.

S: The entire institution of gift giving makes no sense.

H: Too late.

S: Let's say that I go out and I spend fifty dollars on you, it's a laborious activity, because I have to imagine what you need, whereas you know what you need. Now I can simplify things, just give you the fifty dollars directly and, you could give me fifty dollars on my birthday, and so on until one of us dies leaving the other one old and fifty dollars richer. And I ask you, is it worth it?

H: Told you not to ask. (S01E16; 06:50 – 07:23)

The example (41) reveals one of the situations where Leonard provides less information than it is required by the listener (Penny here) and thus does not observe the maxim of quantity intentionally. He does not want to bore Penny with information from the field of physics and he is also partly ashamed of his geekiness and inability to talk about common themes, which interests Penny.

(41) P: So, what's new in the world of physics?

L: Nothing. (S01E03; 17:18 – 17:20)

## 7.2 Maxim of quality

The maxim of quality is usually flouted in three ways – by lying, by irony or sarcasm and by saying unverified information. All these ways are illustrated in the following examples.

The conversation between Penny, Sheldon and Leonard in the example (42) shows how Leonard violates the maxim of quality deliberately, although nobody recognizes that. He lies to Penny that they cannot attend her music performance in order not to hurt her feelings by saying that she is not a good singer. The example also illustrates that Sheldon does not like lying and he is not glad to support his friend's lie. This fact is based on his unwillingness for helping other people.

(42) P: It's this Friday at eight, you guys want to come?

S+L: No.

L: Because.... uh, Friday, we are attending a symposium on molecular positronium.

S: I think that's a week from Tuesday at six.

L: No, it's this Friday, at eight. (S01E10; 02:27 – 02:43)

Although Sheldon is not usually able to either recognize sarcasm (see example 38) or use it, he says one sentence where he uses an irony as shown in the example (43).

Sheldon's utterance signals his egocentric personality, because he is interested only in his own affairs and not in problems of other people, in other words he is not helpful.

- (43) S: You know I apologize for my earlier outburst, who needs Halo when we can be regaled with the delightfully folksy tale of the whore of Omaha? (S01E07; 02:09 – 02:16)

The example (44) describes Sheldon's flouting of maxim of quality in his utterance about the Nobel Prize. Although he cannot be certain about the future events and does not have any evidence for claiming it, he is convinced about his truth thus he flouts the maxim unconsciously. This example illustrates Sheldon's inability to appreciate work of other people, which arises from his self-confidence in own intelligence.

- (44) L: Anyway, I've learned my lesson. She's out of my league, I'm done with her, I've got my work, one day I'll win the Nobel Prize and then I'll die alone.

S: Don't think like that, you're not going to die alone.

L: Thank you Sheldon, you're a good friend.

S: And you're certainly not going to win a Nobel Prize. (S01E01; 19:55 – 20:12)

### 7.3 Maxim of relation

The prototypical examples of flouting the maxim of relation are provided mainly by Sheldon in this sitcom. Sheldon's behavior in the following conversations can seem to be rude, because he does not follow the topic of the speaker's utterance and continues the conversation with completely different theme. This is illustrated in the example (45), where he ignores the Leonard's question and comes up with his own thoughts. He does not seem to realize his impoliteness. Rather, he seems to ignore Leonard because he considers only his utterances as the most significant ones, which points to his self-confidence and self-absorption (as the example (46) shows). Another example where Sheldon violates the maxim of relation is shown in (47). He mentions the scientific term homeostasis without any reference to current context of the situation. His utterance can seem irrelevant although it personally makes sense to him. This example illustrates Sheldon's egoism, because he tries to convince Penny about Leonard's positive traits only due to his intolerance of changes.

- (45) P: Oh, oh that's too bad. Well hey, don't worry, I'm sure there is someone out there who is just right for you. (Walks away smiling).
- L: Well what did she mean by that? Was that just a generic platitude or was that a subtle bid for attention?
- S: You know why this hamburger surpasses the Big Boy? This is a single-decker hamburger whereas the Big Boy is a double-decker. This has a much more satisfying meat to bun to condiment ratio. (S01E05; 18:54 – 19:22)
- (46) L: Penny started taking a class. She wrote a paper, she didn't want me to read it, I went behind her back and I read it anyway.
- S: Stephen Hawking hates me.
- L: I don't know what to do. I mean, the paper's terrible. But if I tell her, she'll know that I read it and she'll get really mad.
- S: I was beating him so bad, he doesn't want to be friends anymore. Why does everyone love me except Stephen Hawking? (S06E06; 11:41 – 12:00)
- (47) P: Okay, you listen to me. I think it's really sweet you're trying to protect your friend, but this is none of your business. Got it?
- S: Excuse me. This is not about protecting my friend. I'm a big fan of homeostasis. Do you know what that is?
- P: Of course not.
- S: Homeostasis refers to a system's ability to regulate its internal environment and maintain a constant condition of properties like temperature or pH. (S06E02; 13:10 – 13:42)

#### 7.4 Maxim of manner

As the theoretical part explains, the maxim of manner urges the speakers to be clear, not to be ambiguous and not to over-explain. This fact indicates a connection between the maxim of manner and the maxim of quantity in a way of providing larger amount of information than it is required. Therefore the longer an utterance is, the more ambiguous it often seems to a listener. Yet, even short utterances can be vague and unclear. The maxim of manner is flouted mostly by Sheldon.

The example (48) shows the conversation between Sheldon and Penny, where Sheldon wants to offer his help with cleaning to Penny, however he says it so unclearly that



Penny does not have any idea what he is talking about. This example points to Sheldon's inability to talk clearly and straight to the point, because he tends to be accurate on a content and form of his speech.

(48) P: Oh, great, thank you again (she throws her jacket over the back of the sofa).

S: Penny, I just want you to know that you don't have to live like this. I'm here for you.

P: What's he talking about?

L: It's a joke.

P: I don't get it. (S01E02; 08:02 – 08:20)

In the example (49) Sheldon wants to point out Leonard's obsession with Penny, but does not say it directly. He uses an example from history, which illustrates the same situation. This presents his typical geeky trait, because he uses history as a tool for revealing his knowledge and he also wants to make his utterance humorous. Nevertheless, Penny is not as intelligent as he is; therefore his utterance does not have an intended outcome and seems to be unclear.

(49) P: Okay. Um, here's the thing. So, I've known for a while now that Leonard has had a little crush on me...

S: A little crush? Well I suppose so, in the same way Menelaus had a little crush on Helen of Troy.

P: Alright, yeah, I don't really know who they are...

S: Well Menelaus was the brother of Agamemnon... (S01E17; 13:19 – 13:39)

Sheldon's utterance in the following example does not stick to both the maxim of manner as well as the maxim of quantity, because it is too long and contains difficult terms to provide the listener with understandable information. This utterance can also have a humorous effect, because Sheldon begins his speech by saying *it's simple*, which is negated by the following sentences. This example points to Sheldon's inability to provide information in clear and simple way.

(50) L: When you left, you weren't sure whether or not you wanted to know what was in your dad's letter, so we came up with kind of a cool solution.

H: Oh, yeah, what's that?

S: It's simple, really. It occurred to me that knowing and not knowing can be achieved by creating a macroscopic example of quantum superposition. The principle that a physical system exists partially in all its possible states at once. (S06E19; 14:10 – 14:33)

All the examples of flouting the four maxims in this chapter help to establish the patterns of behavior that are typical for the geek characters. Majority of examples reveal Sheldon's characteristic traits, because he has the most typical traits for geeks as the main geek character in this sitcom. The traits that are typical for Sheldon are egoism, impoliteness in conversation, inability to talk about common themes, inability to talk clearly and straight to the point and his self-confidence in own knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this bachelor thesis was to analyze the language and the non-language aspects that contribute to the construction of identity of the geek characters of the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and to compare those aspects with the non-geek character. The analysis was based on the corpus material that consists of the transcripts of season 1 and 6 of the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.

The theoretical part was devoted to explanation of the terms that are connected with the practical part, for the purpose to make the analysis more clear. The practical part was based on the analysis that helped to reveal the aspects that contribute to the construction of the geek identity of the characters in the sitcom. Those aspects were revealed on the basis of the discourse analysis of the transcripts and examination of situations when the characters flout the maxims of the cooperative principle of the pragmatic field.

Among the non-language aspects that help to establish the main characters as geeks belong mainly the geeks' clothes, interests, behavior and characteristics. As the analysis demonstrates, they prefer unfashionable, but original clothes at the same time, which follow exact pattern during all seasons. Then their interests are covered mainly by geeky games, comics and sci-fi films. Among the typical features of their behavior belong their physical weakness and the lack of social skills. Those aspects were compared with the Penny's ones, to demonstrate how the characters differ in their appearance, interests and behavior. Penny prefers modern clothes and takes care of her appearance; therefore her main interests are shopping and fashion. She is also more skilled in socializing and often meets new people. Generally, it can be said that Penny serves as the geeks' counterpoint that helps to emphasize their geeky characteristics.

Concerning the language aspects that help to construct the characters as geeks, the analysis reveals that the geeks tend to talk about topics that are less common in everyday speech, such as the science or the technology, and thus also use less colloquial language. Other typical features of their language are the use of formal expressions, the use of idioms and the use of terminology (which is an outcome of their membership in the scientists' subculture). These features are employed for the purpose of pointing to their intelligence and also knowledge of language. Then it is demonstrated that they are not able to express themselves in the simple way, because they use complex syntactic structures of their sentences. The subchapter about humor and the geeks reveals many characteristics that help to construct their geek identity, for instance their self-confidence in own intelligence and their inability to use their theoretical knowledge in practice. It also illustrates the usage of geeks' jokes, which are

based mainly on the science and the figurative language. The analysis of Penny's usage of humor indicates how her sense of humor differs from the geeks' one. She makes fun of the strange interests of the geeks, but in a positive way and uses the irony deliberately to provoke humorous effects of her utterances. The analysis of flouting of the four maxims of the cooperative principle mainly focuses on Sheldon, the main geek character, revealing his typical characteristics, such as the egoism, the self-confidence in own knowledge and the inability to talk clearly and straight to the point as when he flouts the maxims of quantity and manner.

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## **LIST OF TABLES**

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