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Cheerfully Misunderstanding Deixis on the Screen: Coach is his (Nick)name and Misunderstanding Deixis is his Game (Cheers, NBC, 1982-1993)

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Abstract:

This paper is a qualitative analysis of the misunderstandings resulting from Coach's difficulties to process his interlocutors' use of exophoric and endophoric deixis (and anadeixis), in order to show how this character both stands out and, paradoxically, fits in. This tension between standing out and fitting in shows 1° that elucidating deixis is not as effortless as could be thought and 2° that these misunderstandings prove to be a key-element of the humor of the sitcom, meant to welcome everyone as they are in the Boston bar called *Cheers*.

Abstract :

Cet article est une analyse qualitative des malentendus provenant des difficultés de Coach à interpréter les expressions déictiques (et anadéictiques) employées par ses interlocuteurs, afin de montrer comment ce personnage se démarque tout en étant paradoxalement à sa place dans le groupe. Cette tension entre différence et similarité montre que 1° élucider ce à quoi la deixis fait référence n'est pas aussi aisé que l'on pourrait le croire et 2° que ces malentendus s'avèrent être un élément clé de l'humour de cette sitcom, destinée à accueillir chacun et chacune tel qu'il est dans le bar bostonien *Cheers*.

Keywords: anadeixis, deixis, misunderstanding, *Cheers*, interactional humor, community-building

Mots-clés : anadeixis, deixis, malentendu, *Cheers*, humour interactionnel, construction de communauté

**Cheerfully Misunderstanding Deixis on the Screen:
Coach is his (Nick)name and Misunderstanding Deixis is his Game
(*Cheers*, NBC, 1982-1993)**

1. A Brief Introduction to *Cheers*

“Sometimes you wanna go where everybody knows your name. And they’re always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see our troubles are all the same. You wanna be where everybody knows your name.” Little did Gary Portnoy and Judy Hart know that people would be singing the lyrics and humming the theme tune of *Cheers* for the next 40 years (and counting) when they came up with them in 1982. And yet, here we are, still watching *Cheers*¹—thanks to DVDs and/or VOD services (*Cheers* was indeed on Netflix US from July 1st 2017 to July 2020² and is now available on CBS All Access, Hulu, Amazon Prime Video and Peacock).

Cheers was not instantly popular though. Journalist Peter Kerr³ and scholar Michelle Hilmes⁴ mention “dismally” low initial ratings for the first season of the show, Hilmes even contending that the only reason why NBC did not cancel the sitcom was that it “simply could not afford to cancel new programs within a few weeks of their premieres; it could not afford replacements”⁵. Arguably though, this stability marked a sharp contrast with the other two network schedules, which “were shuffled at a desperate, frantic pace,” thus giving *Cheers* time to build its audience⁶. Yet, Hilmes’s account of *Cheers*’s ratings in 1983⁷ and 1984 ignores two facts: 1) *Cheers* fared much better in

¹ Janet Staiger notes that “very popular programs such as *M*A*S*H*, *The Mary Tyler Moor Show*, *Cheers*, *The Simpsons*, and *Seinfeld*—just as much as many soap operas and sports events—contribute to U.S. cultural history through their traces in the daily lives of their viewers.” in *Blockbuster TV. Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era*. New York and London: New York University Press, 200, p. 50. It is not a stretch to think that American viewers are still watching *Cheers* and the numerous reactions of disappointed fans to Netflix US’s announcement that *Cheers* would be removed from its catalog is probably an indication of that. See the comments after the article by Kasey Moore, “‘Cheers’ Seasons 1-11 Leaving Netflix in July 2020”, *What’s on Netflix*, May 20th, 2020. <https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/leaving-soon/cheers-seasons-1-11-leaving-netflix-in-july-2020/>, consulted Sept. 13th, 2021.

² <https://www.whats-on-netflix.com/?s=cheers>, consulted Sept. 13th, 2021.

³ Peter Kerr, “NBC Comedy ‘Cheers’ Turns into a Success”, *The New York Times* Nov. 29, 1983. Retrieved from Factiva database Sept. 29th, 2021.

⁴ Michelle Hilmes, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name. *Cheers* and the Mediation of Cultures”, *Wide Angle*, Vol. 12, No. 2, April 1990, p. 67 [p. 64-73].

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Joseph J. Darowski and Kate Darowski similarly mention “abysmal ratings” in *Cheers: A Cultural History*, Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, p. 8.

the summer reruns⁸ and 2) the sitcom was a critical success as early as 1983 as evidenced by its winning the Outstanding Comedy Series Emmy that year⁹, as well as other Emmy awards for writing, direction and outstanding actress¹⁰—two signs that the sitcom was probably headed for a bright future (and *Cheers* eventually moved its way up to become one of the top-ten programs of the 1980s and early 1990s).

And indeed, in 1984 and later, more and more people turned on their television on Thursday nights for what NBC promoted as “The Best Night of Television on Television” to watch *The Cosby Show*, *Family Ties* and *Cheers*—*Cheers* eventually making its way to the top ten most-watched programs according to Nielsen audience ratings and staying there for eight years in a row¹¹. For eleven seasons, the sitcom, set in the eponymous Boston bar, revolved around an ensemble cast, composed of womanizing former baseball player Sam Malone, who also happens to be the owner and head tender of the bar; Carla Tortelli, its sarcastic waitress; “Coach” Ernie Pantusso, the second bartender (replaced by Woody Boyd from season 4 onwards); Norm Peterson, Cliff Clavin and Frasier Crane, three regular bar patrons (Norm and Cliff from season 1, Frasier from season 3); Diane Chambers, the bar’s (rather snobbish) waitress and one of Sam’s love interests for the first four seasons; Rebecca Howe, bar manager and waitress in the last seven seasons. Early on, the relationship between Sam and Diane became central to the show, and some argue that the sitcom notably “helped introduce TV audiences to the viability of will-they, won’t-they relationships”¹². Yet, other characters participated in making the show what it was, namely “Coach” Ernie Pantusso.

Ernie Pantusso (played by Nicholas Colasanto) was the second bartender of *Cheers* for the first three seasons (1982-1985)—his character is written out at the beginning of the fourth season, after Colasanto’s passing in February 1985, as also having died. He is

⁸ Co-creator James Burrows emphasizes that during the summer reruns of the first season, *Cheers* reached the ninth place in terms of audience ratings. See Brian Raftery, “The Best TV Show That’s Ever Been”, *GQ*, Sept. 27th, 2012. <https://www.gq.com/story/cheers-oral-history-extended>, consulted Sept. 13th, 2021.

⁹ *Cheers* actually won the Outstanding Comedy Series Emmy in 1983, 1984, 1989, 1991 and 1992. See Graham Thomson, *American Culture in the 1980s*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

¹⁰ <https://www.emmys.com/shows/cheers>, consulted Sept. 13th, 2021.

¹¹ See Janet Staiger’s chart entitled “Top Ten Programs, 1960-” in *Blockbuster TV. Must-See Sitcoms in the Network Era*. New York and London: New York University Press, 200, p. 24-25.

¹² Vikram Murthi, “When *Cheers* Became *Cheers*: An Appreciation of ‘Endless Slumper’”, *Vulture*, December 6th, 2017. <https://www.vulture.com/2017/12/cheers-an-appreciation-of-the-endless-slumper-episode.html>, consulted Sept. 13th, 2021.

best remembered as “Coach,” which is the nickname that everybody uses at the bar because Ernie Pantusso used to be a baseball coach (notably with the Boston Red Sox). And the bartender is clearly unused to being called Ernie—to the point that he needs to be reminded that his name is Ernie Pantusso in S01E01:

COACH (*Holding the phone receiver*). Cheers. Yeah, just a second. (*Addressing the customers in the bar.*) Is there an Ernie Pantusso here?

SAM (*With a friendly tone.*) That’s you, Coach.

COACH (*To the person on the phone*). Speaking.

Obviously, this interaction also introduces the audience to Coach’s defining characteristics: “lovable yet senile”¹³, “sweet” and “simple-minded”¹⁴, in other words, endearingly and humorously cognitively impaired. As I have argued in “Cognitive Distortions and Hilarious Implementations of the Principles of Relevance Theory: The Case of Coach in *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1985)”¹⁵, Coach displays many cognitive misfires over the course of the three seasons he is one of the main characters of—probably because of his getting repeatedly hit by pitches when he played baseball (as mentioned in S01E03, S01E22, S3E08) or his tendency to bang his head, either to attract young ladies’ attention (S01E09) or to vent his anger (S01E08). Yet, his cognitive impairment and its consequences on the conversational exchanges between Coach and the people at the bar do not lead to awkward or even sad interactions. Coach’s frequently misunderstanding what the people at the bar say, imply or refer to prove to be one of the sitcom’s comic features.

In this article, I will focus on one type of misunderstandings, those resulting from Coach’s difficulty to identify the intended referents of deictic markers used by the other characters at the bar to determine how these interactional misfires contribute to the humor of the first three seasons of *Cheers*.

2. Conversational Misfires on the Screen

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Dave Nemetz, “How ‘Cheers’ Replaced Coach: James Burrows Looks Back, 30 Years Later”, *YahooEntertainment*, February 12th, 2015. <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/blogs/tv-news/cheers-james-burrows-coach-woody-010936771.html>, consulted Sept. 13th, 2021.

¹⁵ Virginie Iché, “Cognitive Distortions and Hilarious Implementations of the Principles of Relevance Theory: The Case of Coach in *Cheers* (NBC, 1982-1985)”, in *Distortions cognitives : formes, récits, imaginaires (domaine anglophone)*, eds. Blandine Pennec and Nathalie Vincent-Arnaud, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Midi, 2021, p. 71-86.

That conversational misfires should happen at all in naturally-occurring conversations should come as no surprise. As cognitive linguists Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson have put it¹⁶, though human cognition tends to be geared to maximize relevance, “there may be many shortcomings, many cognitive sub-mechanisms that fail to deliver enough effect for the effort they require, many occasions when the system’s resources are poorly allocated.” In other words, speakers generally strive to be optimally relevant and make their communication worth processing for their hearers, but may on occasion overlook their hearers’ dispositions and/or unintentionally ask for too much cognitive effort for too few contextual effects. Hearers likewise will balance contextual effects against processing effort and usually “find thinking worth the effort,” “except when they are in a state of utter exhaustion¹⁷”. The “degree of intellectual alertness¹⁸” of the hearer will unsurprisingly have some bearing on their processing the speaker’s output. But even cognitively efficient hearers may reach false conclusions, the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure being probabilistic and not deterministic.

Consequently, misunderstandings may occur, when “a form of understanding [...] is *partially or totally deviant* from what the speaker intended to communicate” and when “the interlocutor who misunderstands is not aware of it¹⁹”. Misunderstandings may arise from socio-cultural difference²⁰ or from interactionally endogenous sources and, notably, in Schegloff’s words, “problematic reference” and “problematic sequential implicativeness²¹.” In other words, hearers may misidentify the intended referent of some word or expression used by their interlocutors or misconstrue what illocutionary goal their interlocutors intended to carry out, i.e., “what action is being done by/through some turn or turn component, and accordingly what type of talk/action is relevant or appropriate next²²”. As Bazzanella and Damiano have shown²³, triggers to

¹⁶ Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance. Communication and Cognition*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1995, p. 262.

¹⁷ Sperber and Wilson, p. 126.

¹⁸ Sperber and Wilson, p. 161.

¹⁹ Edda Weigand, “Misunderstanding: The Standard Case,” *Journal of Pragmatics* vol. 31, 1999, p. 769-770 [p. 763-785]. Original emphasis.

²⁰ Emanuel A. Schegloff, “Some Sources of Understanding in Talk-in-Interaction,” *Linguistics* vol. 25, 1987, p. 201-203 [p. 201-218] and Weigand p. 764.

²¹ Schegloff, p. 204.

²² Schegloff, p. 206. Weigand similarly mentions misunderstandings potentially arising from the hearer’s wrongfully drawing inferences when processing indirect speech acts, p. 776.

misunderstandings can be structural (when construing the code proves challenging, namely, because of “disturbances along the communicative channel” or “similarities between elements of the linguistic code”), related to the speaker (when the speaker’s mispronouncing, misconceptions or structuring of information on the pragmatic and syntactic level generates misunderstandings), related to the interlocutor (whose cognitive system may be faulty) or related to the interaction between the participants (who may not share the same knowledge or who may not focus on the same aspect of the interaction).

Interactions in series and movies, are scripted and as such, of course, non-natural. Yet, they do not, by all means, represent a communicative ideal: they evoke “an illusion of real-life conversations²⁴” and, as such, feature pragmatic failures alongside communicative successes. As Dynel contends, skillful scriptwriters exploit the principles and conventions of ordinary communication when imagining potential interactions between the characters of the fiction they work on. Accordingly, there is no intrinsic difference between an interaction that has been “carefully constructed by a scriptwriter and then rendered by actors under the director’s supervision,” and an interaction “intuitively employed by regular language users.” In both cases, she argues, interactions “operate[...] on the same linguistic resources, in accordance with deeply ingrained, and frequently only intuitively felt, communication rules²⁵”. Brône’s analysis of hyper- and misunderstanding in interactional humor, based on the study of the fictional corpus *Blackadder*, confirms that staged misunderstandings result from sources which are similar to those identified by Schegloff, as mentioned above: “a spectrum of 10 phenomena, ranging from lexico-semantic (polysemy, (near-)homonymy), constructional (idiom) and syntactic (scope) ambiguity to more pragmatic issues (reference, illocution, deixis, inference) can all yield potential ambiguities²⁶”.

For this article, I will focus on one of the sources of misunderstandings that has been pinpointed as leading to humor in interaction, i.e. deixis. The term “deixis” is derived

²³ Carla Bazzanella and Rossana Damiano, “The Interactional Handling of Misunderstanding in Everyday Conversations,” *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 31, 1999, p. 821 [p. 817-836].

²⁴ Marta Dynel, “Stranger than Fiction. A Few Methodological Notes on Linguistic Research in Film Discourse,” *Brno Studies in English*, vol. 37, no. 1, 2011, p. 43 [p. 41-61].

²⁵ Dynel, p. 44.

²⁶ Geert Brône, “Hyper- and Misunderstanding in Interactional Humor,” *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 40, 2008, p. 2058 [p. 2027-2061].

from the Ancient Greek term for “pointing” or “indicating²⁷” and has been famously defined by Fillmore as “the name given to those formal properties of utterances which are determined by, and which are interpreted by knowing, certain aspects of the communication act in which the utterances in question can play a role²⁸”—in particular the identity of the participants in the conversation, their location and the time at which the utterances are produced. Different kinds of deixis have been identified by Fillmore to better account for the phenomenon, that is “person deixis” (making it possible to distinguish the speaker, the hearer and everyone else), “place deixis” (pointing to the place or places referred to by the speaker), “time deixis” (pointing to the time referred to by the speaker) and “discourse deixis” (pointing to “the preceding and following parts of the discourse²⁹”).

Though some have argued that expressions referring to segments mentioned earlier in an utterance or text or, conversely, to segments that will be explicitly introduced in an utterance or text, are not used deictically (but anaphorically or cataphorically)³⁰, recent analysis of the phenomena of deixis and anaphora point to some degree of overlap between the two, therefore leading to the need to question strictly non-deictic interpretations of the phenomena of anaphora and cataphora linked to what Fillmore calls “discourse deixis.” Cornish defends indeed a “scalar conception” of the relationship between deixis and anaphora, understood as “complementary discourse-referring procedures³¹”, which are bridged via the notion of “anadeixis.” “Anadeixis” combines the procedure carried out by deixis, whose purpose is, according to Cornish, to direct the hearer’s attention focus towards a new aspect of a previously mentioned discourse referent or towards a new discourse entity, and the procedure carried out by anaphora, i.e. retrieving an already existing “figure” together with its “ground³²”. In

²⁷ Gunter Senft, *Understanding Pragmatics*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 42.

²⁸ Charles J. Fillmore, *Santa Cruz Lectures on Deixis 1971*, Bloomington US, Indiana University Linguistics Club, 1975, p. 154.

²⁹ Fillmore, p. 155.

³⁰ See for instance Karl Bühler, *Theory of Language: The Representational Function of Language*, 1934, Translated by Donald Fraser Goodwin, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 1990, p. 97 and Georgia Green, *Pragmatics and Natural Language Understanding*, Second Edition, New York, Routledge, 1996, p. 23-24.

³¹ Francis Cornish, “‘Strict’ Anadeixis, Discourse Deixis and Text Structuring,” *Language Sciences*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2011, p. 754 [p. 753-767].

³² See the Gestalt theory for the well-known contrast between the “figure” and the (back)“ground”.

other words, the procedure underlying the use of expression used anadeictically involves retrieving an already-mentioned discourse entity but redirecting the addressee’s attention focus to that referent in order to make it more salient than it initially was. Cornish’s scale of indexicality (Fig. 1) reveals the extent of indexical expressions which can be used anadeictically.

<FIG. 1 – Cornish – Scale of Indexicality>

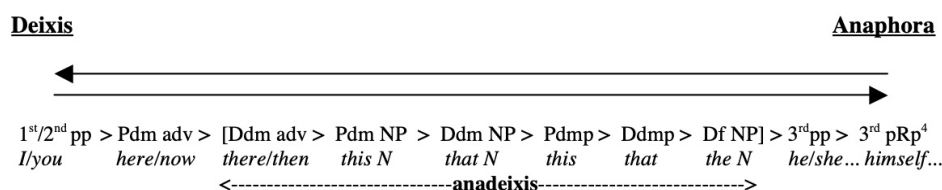


Figure 1: Scale of indexicality coded by certain categories of indexical expressions (Cornish 2007, Fig. 1, p. 149 – slightly revised)

Consequently, the corpus of interactional exchanges featuring Coach’s misunderstandings of deixis in *Cheers* will include the expected personal pronouns “I”, “you” and “we” (which is astonishingly not mentioned in Cornish’s scale of indexicality), but also demonstrative determiners and pronouns “this” and “that” and some instances of anadeictically-used “the³³”.

While I will not try to determine here whether misunderstandings of deixis are more frequent in sitcoms, and in particular in *Cheers*, than they are in naturally-occurring conversations³⁴, this paper will be a qualitative analysis of the conversational breakdowns originating from Coach’s difficulties to process deixis (and anadeixis), in order to show how this character both stands out and, paradoxically, fits in. This tension between standing out and fitting in will prove to be a key-element of the humor of the sitcom, meant to welcome everyone as they are in the Boston bar called Cheers.

3. Coach’s Misunderstanding Exophoric Reference

³³ See Segal who similarly asserts that “definite descriptors (e.g., *the book*) and even proper names are frequently subject to the speech situation for interpretation.” Erwin M. Segal, “Narrative Comprehension and the Role of Deictic Shift Theory,” in *Deixis in Narrative. A Cognitive Science Perspective*, ed. Judith F. Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E. Hewitt, New York and London, Routledge, 1995, p. 10 [p. 3-17].

³⁴ See Dynel, p. 45: “film genres may exhibit communicative tendencies which are not commonplace in non-fictional discourse. For instance, comedies abound in repartee and contests of wit (cf. Kozloff 2000), which do occur in everyday conversations, albeit with lower frequency. Consequently, it would be ill-advised to conduct sociolinguistic quantitative humour research on the basis of fictional discourse.”

As already intimated, deixis is sometimes described as verbal pointing, in the sense that speakers use verbal resources to point at extralinguistic referents (in the case of exophoric reference), or at discourse referents (in the case of endophoric reference³⁵), towards which speakers want their addressees to direct their attention focus. Understanding what the intended referent of deictic expressions such as *I*, *you*, *this glass* and *that person* implies drawing correct implications from the identity of the speaker, what or whom s/he seems to be verbally pointing at and in which context. Misidentifying who the speaker is, in what capacity s/he speaks, etc. will most surely lead to interactional misfires.

“Coach” Ernie Pantusso very often stands behind the bar, serving drinks and wiping the counter. He thus occupies a privileged position to identify who speaks and what they are (verbally or literally) pointing at, since his standing there enables him to see the regulars, Cliff and Norm, Sam, and the two waitresses, Carla and Diane, and hear or overhear their discussions. And Coach is fully aware of this; in S01E6, he even declares: “I actually get paid to stand here and listen to great conversation.” In spite of this, Coach recurrently proves unable to elucidate the referents of the deictic expressions used by the other characters, or even, for that matter, to make sense of literal pointing.

3.1 Misunderstanding literal pointing

At the end of S02E15, Coach asks Sam and Diane who made the decision to tell Coach to leave them alone for them to finally spend an evening together. Neither Sam nor Diane wants to take the responsibility for breaking their friend’s heart. While saying they made a joint decision (SAM. What difference does it make whose fault it was? It’s done. We both have to share the blame. DIANE. Yes, the important thing is that we showed you our feelings. Honesty was our only recourse. SAM. Absolutely. It was a

³⁵ Halliday and Hasan discuss endophoric vs. exophoric reference in terms of “situational reference” for exophora (an exophoric item “signal[ing] that reference must be made to the context of situation”) and “textual reference” for endophora (an endophoric item signaling that reference must be made to the preceding or following text—in which cases they distinguish “cataphora” (when referring to the following text) and “anaphora” (when referring to the preceding text). See M. A. K Halliday and Ruqaiya Hasan, *Cohesion in English*, London, Longman, 1976, p. 33. As clarified by Cornish, typically cataphoric and anaphoric terms can be used anadeictically. See Cornish 2011 (mentioned above) and Francis Cornish, “SN démonstratifs et Anadeixis: Sens ‘spatial’, ou valeurs tributaires d’une stratégie pragmatique potentielle?” *Journal of French Language Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2017, pp. 215–239.

mutual decision.), they each point at the other to suggest who is to blame. A second later, however, when Coach makes it clear that he actually wanted to thank them because their telling him to leave led him to get to know Katherine, who they initially tried to set him up with, they start pointing at themselves for Coach to understand who is to thank. This pointing is obviously very entertaining for the audience—but it turns out to be confusing for Coach, as the concluding scene of the episode shows (Fig. 2):

<Screengrab Fig. 2 – S2E15 Coach Aren't they a wonderful couple>



Figure 2: COACH. Say, Normie, aren't they a wonderful couple?

All the gestures Sam and Diane made are subsumed in Coach's making a circling motion of his index finger at the side of his head to imply they are insane, which makes it plain for the audience that the character has been unable to process the gap between the contents of their utterances and their literal pointing at each other and, later, themselves.

3.2 Misunderstanding person deixis

If Coach has a hard time processing such gestures, it is no wonder that more abstract forms of pointing like person deixis can be utterly perplexing for him. Over the course

of the first three seasons of *Cheers*, there are not many occurrences of Coach's misunderstanding person deixis and consequently needing clarifications, but the mere fact that they exist is revealing. No other character of the sitcom is portrayed as having difficulties processing person deixis, this probably having to do with the fact that typically, as is stressed by Langacker, the referents of *I* and singular *you* are "uniquely determined in the context of a given speech event" and the referents of the plurals *we* and *you* are, similarly, "normally quite apparent"³⁶. And yet, season 2 features several misunderstandings of plural *we* and *you*. In S02E02, when Sam tells him "Coach, we were gonna kiss," Coach is so focused on what he is doing that he does not assess the communication situation properly and overlooks the fact that Diane has been flirting with Sam in the guise of/while ordering drinks. Coach thus incorrectly processes "we" as meaning "Sam and Coach" instead of "Sam and Diane," as his question makes it clear: "We were?"

Similarly, in S02E03, Coach thinks "we" refers to "Coach and Norm" in the following conversational exchange:

COACH. By the way, Normie, how did you and Vera meet?

NORM. Didn't I tell you? We were in school together.

COACH. We were?

NORM. Not you and I. Vera and I.

While in S02E02, the misunderstanding exclusively results from Coach's faulty construing the reference of "we," in S02E03, Coach's error also comes from his failing to interpret Norm's statement as an answer to his question—and mistakenly treating it as a comment on the fact that Norm's not telling the story of his meeting Vera to former schoolmate Coach is astonishing. Norm's strategy to repair the faulty adjacency pair does not consist in clarifying his illocutionary act though, or reminding Coach that Norm and Coach never were schoolmates, but in elucidating the reference of "we."

Since Coach does not have any hearing problem and never gets confused as to who speaks, he never misunderstands what the referent of *I* is, including in the cases of misunderstandings of *we* just analyzed (*we* being a conflation of *you* and *I*). Coach's problem in construing *we* actually comes indeed from his determining who *you* refers

³⁶ Ronald Langacker, "Constructing the Meanings of Personal Pronouns," in *Aspects of Meaning Construction*, ed. Günter Radden *et al.*, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, John Benjamins, 2007, p. 176 [p. 171-187].

to, which regularly proves to be hard to process for him. In S02E05, when Carla greets Diane's former fiancé with the following words: "You slime! You are a total scuzzball. You're not fit to live with sewer rats.", Coach is relieved to hear Sumner's reaction ("I can't defend myself."), which makes it clear that she was not addressing him ("My god, I thought she was talking to me."). In S03E25, when a customer asks him: "Say, aren't you Ernie Pantusso?", Coach replies: "Are you talking to me, Sir?" in spite of the customer's using his name. And in S01E1, when Diane (who, at that point, had not been hired as a waitress yet) asks: "Excuse me, where is your bathroom?", Coach replies: "Next to my bedroom." thus failing to see that he is asked such a question in his capacity as a bartender working at Cheers, who is accordingly familiar with the premises, and not as a person living in an apartment in Boston, which a customer would like to know more about.

This final example of person deixis shows that Coach's misunderstanding deixis does not only arise from incorrect interpretations of who the people involved in the communication situation are; Coach incorrectly assesses the deictic (and anadeictic) references to the contextual situation as a whole.

3.3 *Misconstruing this, that and the*

This and *that* are both demonstratives used to point to an element of the (preceding or succeeding) discourse or an element of the contextual situation. As is explained by Huddleston³⁷, while *this* is very often used in a "proximal" sense, i.e. to convey a sense of relative spatial, temporal or even affective proximity to the speaker, *that* is very often used in a "distal" sense, i.e. to convey a sense of relative spatial, temporal or affective distance with the speaker. The definite article *the* is not inherently deictic—and is traditionally seen as used anaphorically, even when they refer to the contextual situation, as in Lapaire and Rotgé's *Linguistique et Grammaire de l'anglais*³⁸, for instance—but may be used anadeictically as stressed by Cornish³⁹.

³⁷ See, namely, Rodney Huddleston, *Introduction to the Grammar of English*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, p. 296.

³⁸ Jean-Rémi Lapaire and Wilfrid Rotgé, *Linguistique et grammaire de l'anglais*, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2002, p. 122.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Coach is portrayed as having difficulties processing these three markers, which his interlocutors use to refer to extralinguistic elements or actions that they want him to draw his attention focus to. In S02E17, delivery men bring in a huge crate and ask Sam where to put it. After Sam denies ever buying anything like it, he sees the invoice with Ernie Pantusso's name on it, and then asks: "Coach, did you buy this?" Although Coach understands what Sam verbally pointed to with "this," that is to say the item brought in by the delivery men (and not, for instance, the clipboard he is holding), he does not fully understand Sam's statement, as Sam was not referring to the crate per se, but to the contents of the crate, that is the antique scale, as Sam makes it clear a second later:

COACH. Why would I buy a crate?

SAM. It's an antique scale.

COACH. I bought the scale. Now that I look at it, I'm disappointed.

S01E19 features another of Coach's misinterpretations of the exophoric proform *this*. After Sam realizes that Coach has been conned for the last year by a so-called friend named George, he makes the decision to bail out another con man, Harry, whom they know since he has frequented the bar on multiple occasions, to ask him to retrieve the money by cheating George. Sam then calls Information to get the phone number of the Boston jail, as this is where Harry is. When waiting for the number, he wants to make sure Coach is still on board before he goes ahead.

SAM. Sure you don't mind me doing this?

COACH. No no, go ahead Sam, I use Information to get numbers all the time.

While Sam's "this" referred to his calling a thief, Harry, to catch another thief, George, Coach assigned a different referent to that proform: for him, "this" refers to Sam's current action, calling Information. Coach's answer is not illogical as Sam's calling Information is taking place right when Sam uses the proximal proform "this"—Coach's misinterpretation is entirely valid, though unmistakably false, in this communication situation.

Likewise, Coach interprets the distal demonstrative "that" against the grain in S02E12:

MR. KRAMER. Goodnight, everybody. And thank you. I've had a wonderful time just when I needed it. Someday I hope you'll appreciate how much I really did enjoy it.

COACH. Goodbye, Mr. Kramer.

NORM. Now, that's a nice guy.

COACH. Thanks, Norm. My pop always told me to say goodbye.

Episode S02E12 centers on Mr. Kramer, a one-time customer who went to Cheers to have a drink after he found out he only had six months left to live. Sam offers him to tend drinks for the night after Mr. Kramer confesses that he worked as a bartender when he was a student and that those were “the best years of [his] life.” Mr. Kramer turns out to be an excellent and charming bartender—which explains Norm’s comment after Mr. Kramer has left to catch his plane. Norm’s use of the distal demonstrative “that” makes perfect sense in this situation, as Mr. Kramer has just crossed the threshold of the bar. As in the case of the proximal “this” mentioned above, Coach’s construal of Norm’s comment cannot be said to be completely illogical though: Coach is not standing next to Norm (Sam, for instance, is closer to him; see Fig. 3), he is looking down and cannot see Norm’s nod in the direction of the door and he has just spoken (and uttered a polite formula).

<Fig. 3 – S02E12 – Norm. That’s a nice guy.>



Figure 3: NORM. That’s a nice guy.

As is obvious though, Coach’s understanding of Norm’s “that” as a comment on “Goodbye, Mr. Kramer” is not the most logical hypothesis—what Norm draws

everybody's attention focus to is his appreciation of Mr. Kramer who illuminated the bar that night, and not Coach's polite (but in no way extraordinarily polite) goodbye.

Finally, Coach misconstrues an anadeictically-used "the" in S03E06:

COACH. Look, Irene, what I'm trying to say is, I love you and I want you to marry me, but I can't find the words to say it.

IRENE. Ernie, you've said all the words you need to. I'd love to be your wife.

COACH. She said yes!

SAM. I guess it seems to be the time for the bartender to pour some champagne.

COACH. Oh, I'm sorry, Sam. What am I thinking?

SAM. No, no, Coach. I got it.

"The" in the noun phrase "the bartender" is partly anaphoric, in the sense that the noun phrase is a direct reference to Sam's job, which is not new information at that point in the series and certainly not new information to Coach. Sam's being a bartender is part of the "ground" and not the "figure." Yet, "the" is partly deictic here because Sam is drawing the attention focus of his interlocutors away from the couple and on to the need to celebrate—and his role in getting the celebration started. In this last example (as in the example taken from S02E03 examined in section 3.2, "We were in school together"), Coach actually misunderstands two elements: the intended referent of the noun phrase determined by "the" as well as the illocutionary goal of Sam's statement. Coach takes it as an indirect reproach (hence his answer, which includes an apology as in the adjacency pair reproach / apology) while it is actually meant as an invitation to rejoice. Coach's difficulties to process deixis therefore do not only result from his frequently incorrect processing of the situational context, but also from his misconstruing the interactional pragmatic workings of language.

4. Coach's Misunderstanding Endophoric Deixis

Elucidating exophoric reference proves challenging for Coach, who frequently incorrectly processes the situational context of utterances as well as the pragmatics of interaction. Unsurprisingly, endophoric reference, that is reference to discourse entities, is also hard to process for him.

4.1 Backward-pointing that

Halliday and Hasan contend that demonstrative *that* is “always anaphoric⁴⁰,” in other words backward-pointing, endophorically referring to already-said elements. Part of Coach’s misfires concerning endophoric deixis comes indeed from his misidentifying what part of the cotext on the left-hand side the deictic proform refers to (in other words, what has been said before *that*). In S01E01, Coach explains to Diane who Sam was before he owned this bar: “He was one of the best Little Leaguers ever to play the game.” Sam not immodestly tries to curb Coach’s enthusiasm, but Coach will not hear it:

COACH. No, I mean it, he was the very best, as sure as the Earth is round.

SAM. You don’t believe that, Coach.

COACH. You know, I never used to believe it till I saw those pictures from the spaceship.

Coach’s answer reveals that the demonstrative proform “that,” which Diane, Sam and presumably the audience know referred to “he was the very best,” is actually interpreted by Coach as referring to the second part of his utterance, “as sure as the Earth is round,” which was however not the focus of attention.

Similarly, in S02E05, Diane’s former lover, Sumner, comes back to the bar a year after leaving Diane for his ex-wife. He asks Coach: “Over dinner last night, a mutual friend of ours informed me that Diane works here. Is that correct?” Instead of interpreting that question as any speaker would be expected to, that is to say instead of understanding that “that” refers to “Diane works here,” Coach thinks that it refers to the whole proposition “a mutual friend of ours informed me that Diane works here” and accordingly replies: “Gee, I don’t know. I wasn’t at the dinner.” The conclusion Coach reaches is both syntactically possible, as “that” can refer to one or the other proposition, and logically impossible, since Sumner reminded Coach that he is a professor—from which Coach should have deduced that Sumner’s memory retrieval abilities are presumably effective.

All the occurrences included in the corpus and analyzed so far are instances of Coach’s faulty but not completely illogical misinterpreting his interlocutor’s intended meaning and the situation communication, in other words, instances of logical misfires on Coach’s part. Yet, on one occasion over the course of the first three seasons of

⁴⁰ Halliday and Hasan, p. 68.

Cheers, Coach interprets his interlocutor's utterance against any syntactic logic. This case of syntactic misconstrual in relation to deixis occurs in S01E17:

COACH. You know something, Sam, I always thought you'd make a great date for Diane.

SAM. Oh, Coach, that's crazy. Or is it?

COACH. Let me think about that.

SAM. Of course. That's what she's doing. Oh, that's cute. That is cute.

COACH. Gee, thanks, Sam, I have lost a few pounds.

SAM. No, no, no, don't you see what she's doing? She's setting me up with herself.

At first glance, this is just another misunderstanding of the referent of "that": while Sam is talking about what he inferred from Coach's comment about Sam and Diane making a good couple, Coach thinks that Sam is referring to him. However, Coach should not have reached that interpretation as deictic demonstratives used as pronouns normally refer to non-humans—except in very specific contexts when the speaker intentionally wants to disparage another person or reify her or him⁴¹ (as in the offensive "Throw that out" in which "that" refers to an unwelcome guest who is treated as a thing). Sam likes and respects Coach in spite of all his cognitive flaws, and would not refer to him with the demonstrative pronoun *that*. And yet, that is the meaning that Coach infers from Sam's statement, as his comment shows: "Thanks, Sam, I have lost a few pounds."

Once again, this shows that not only does Coach misunderstand what backward-pointing deictic pronouns refer to, but he also misunderstands what illocutionary goals his interlocutors try to achieve (minimizing Coach's praise in S01E01, or ironically praising Diane's strategy in S01E17).

4.2 Forward-pointing *this*

Though some have argued that *this* can be either cataphoric and anaphoric⁴², Lapaire and Rotgé contend that *this* cannot be anaphoric only. While the submarker TH does code anaphora, the submarker IS conveys what they call "le mode de la non-clôture⁴³," i.e. the idea that *this* is used when further exploration of the referent of the

⁴¹ See Huddleston, *ibid.*

⁴² See namely Halliday and Hasan, p. 68.

⁴³ Lapaire and Rotgé, p. 62-65.

demonstrative is required. To use Cornish's words, *this*, when used anadeictically, directs the attention focus of the hearer towards a new aspect of its referent, which is then not part of the ground but part of the figure. Cataphoric *this* is shown to be a "significant instance of cataphoric cohesion in English"⁴⁴—in the sense that forward-pointing *this* points to noun phrases or propositions that appear in the cotext on the right-hand side (in other words, right after *this*), and as such, should be easy to interpret: the hearer just needs to wait for the speaker to finish his/her utterance. Yet, S01E17 reveals that interpreting forward-pointing *this* can turn out to be tricky anyway for Coach:

CARLA. Listen, Coach, you're not gonna believe this. I was just talking to the guys in the back—

COACH. I'd like to believe it, Carla.

CARLA. No, Coach, not that. You know who that guy, that Sam just set Diane up with is?

COACH. Who?

CARLA. He just got out of the pen, after doing ten years for manslaughter!

Coach believes that Carla's "this" announces "I was just talking to the guys in the back," while it actually refers to what she has just learnt from them. As is made clear by the dash in the transcript of the interaction (and Rhea Perlman's rising intonation when saying "I was just talking to the guys in the back"), Coach's interpretation comes from his interrupting Carla mid-sentence and his not waiting for her to finish her sentence. This is rather unusual for Coach, who is portrayed as being a great listener and never cuts people off when they speak. This self-selection of Coach's in the interactional exchange under analysis is unexpected and constitutes a conversational misfire.

As conversation analysts Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson have shown⁴⁵, conversations are organized around turn-constructive units (TCU)—units of conversation that complete a communicative act. Speakers determine what constitutes a TCU by paying attention to the syntactic, pragmatic or intonational completeness of an utterance, in other words by determining if the TCU ends with a sentence that is grammatically

⁴⁴ Halliday and Hasan, p. 68.

⁴⁵ Harvey Sacks, Emanuel A. Schegloff and Gail Jefferson, "A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation," *Language*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Part 1), Dec. 1974, p. 696-735.

complete, if it has reached its pragmatic purpose, and/or if the intonation is falling (for a statement) or rising (for a yes-no question) for instance. Subsequently, as Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson explain, if the current speaker has selected the next speaker (by directly addressing her, or by pointing at her), she “has the right and is obliged to take next turn to speak⁴⁶”; if the current speaker has not selected the next speaker, any speaker may self-select at the next transition relevance place (TRP). Transfers of speakership from one speaker to another one may involve overlaps, obviously. These inherent features of conversational exchanges overwhelmingly occur at TRPs, typically when the next speaker has not been selected and two speakers self-select at the same time. Overlaps are otherwise unexpected and unusual.

Script writers are not conversation analysts but their intuitive knowledge of the organization of turn-taking in conversation leads them to create characters who respect these implicit rules of conversation⁴⁷—except when they deliberately disrupt the usual way of transferring speakership from one speaker to another one. In S01E17, Coach mistakenly interprets Carla’s utterance as being a full TCU (in spite of her use of a rising intonation), considers the end of her grammatically complete utterance to be a transition relevance place and self-selects for the next turn of conversation. Coach, as all the other characters in *Cheers*, usually gets TCUs and TRPs right; yet, he is the only speaker who gets TCUs and TRPs wrong twice over the course of the first three seasons of the show⁴⁸.

What this final example reveals is that: (1) Coach’s misunderstanding deixis is only part of “his game,” as Coach misconstrues the intuitive rules of language in several ways (whether in terms of the organization of turn-taking in conversation, or in the identification of illocutionary goals); and (2) Coach definitely stands out—he does not seem to function like the other recurring characters do, at least in terms of the interpretation of interactional pragmatics.

⁴⁶ Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, p. 704.

⁴⁷ Dynel, p. 44.

⁴⁸ The other occurrence being in S01E16:

NORM. Didn’t use to be. It used to be a great bar. I hung out there myself.

COACH. What a story, Norm.

NORM. I’m not finished.

COACH. There’s more?

5. Standing out and the question of cohesion

5.1 *Coach vs. the gang*

In a way, all the recurring characters of *Cheers* are extra-ordinary in the original sense of the word: Sam is depicted as a perennial womanizer; Diane as an oversophisticated perpetual college student; Norm as a failed accountant, who spends his life at the bar drinking beer; Cliff as the bar's know-it-all and Carla as a wisecracking cynical waitress. This is not surprising as *Cheers* is a sitcom, and, as Savorelli puts it, "sitcom thrives on highly stereotyped characters"⁴⁹.

All the characters of the first three seasons but *Coach* process deixis properly though. When another character seems to misinterpret an indexical expression, a close analysis of the passage involved reveals how this apparent misconstrual actually relies on what Brône calls "hyper-understanding," i.e. "a speaker's ability to exploit potential weak spots (ambiguity) in a previous speaker's utterance by echoing the latter's words with a fundamentally different reading"⁵⁰ (2028). For example, in S03E8, Norm deliberately alters the meaning of the deictic adverb "here" as used by Sam:

NORM. Listen, Coach, do me a favor and don't make a big fuss over me today, OK, you know?

COACH. You got it.

NORM. You know, no cakes, candles, party hats, singing. None of that, huh?

COACH. OK.

NORM. You know, 'cause really it would be so embarrassing. You know what I mean. And no gifts, all right? Yeah. Whatever you do, don't ask how old I am today.

COACH. Normie, is today your birthday?

NORM. Coach, you remembered, huh?

SAM. Hey, Norm! When did you get here?

NORM. 36 years ago today.

At the beginning of this passage, the interaction between Norm and Coach relies on a gap between Norm's locutionary and illocutionary acts, to use Austin's concepts⁵¹. While Norm's utterances are peppered with negative statements ("don't make a big

⁴⁹ Antonio Savorelli, *Beyond Sitcom. New Directions in American Television Comedy*, Jefferson (NC): McFarland, 2010, p. 26.

⁵⁰ Brône, p. 2028.

⁵¹ John L. Austin. *How to Do Things with Words*. Cambridge (Massachusetts): Harvard University Press, 1962, p. 99-109.

fuss”, “don’t ask”), the determiner “no” (“no cakes...”, “no gifts”) and the pronoun “none” (“none of that”), it becomes clear (even to Coach) that Norm wishes his interlocutors to remember that it is his birthday. His intentional misconstrual of Sam’s “here”—as meaning “on planet Earth” and not “at the bar”—is the final clue that he actually would like everybody at the bar to celebrate his birthday with him—though he does not say so in so many words.

Coach never “hyper-understands” deixis in this way over the course of the first three seasons of the show. Though he is no way portrayed as *completely* unable to process deixis, he distinctly stands out as being the only character who rather frequently incorrectly construes indexicals, his inferential capacities (which are of the utmost importance to, namely, assign reference to deictic expressions) being constructed as faulty compared to all his interlocutors⁵².

5.2 Lack of cohesion?

This may give the impression of a fundamental lack of cohesion at the core of *Cheers*, which may seem in contradiction with the lyrics of the theme song⁵³:

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name
And they’re always glad you came
You want to be where you can see
Our troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name
You want to go where people know
People are all the same
You want to go where everybody knows your name

The song is an invitation to connect a generic “you” with “they” and to build of community of people—as the use of “our” in “our troubles are all the same” makes it plain. The group of people which is thus constituted is defined as homogeneous

⁵² See Iché p. 79-80.

⁵³ The full theme song can be listened to on Gary Portnoy’s website: <https://www.garyportnoy.com/cheers-story-cheers-theme-song/> Consulted October 20th, 2021.

(“People are all the same”)—not necessarily in the sense that they are all alike⁵⁴ but that they all share the same worries. Coach’s misinterpretations of deictic expressions may therefore be seen as generating breaks in the overall cohesion of the text⁵⁵ that constitutes *Cheers*.

The linguistic system has resources to build text construction, the main component of which is cohesion, as has been analyzed by linguists Halliday and Hasan. They define cohesive relations as “relations between two or more elements in a text that are independent of the structure⁵⁶”, for instance a personal pronoun and its antecedent. Cohesion occurs when two related items are “tied⁵⁷”, that is to say cohesively related. Since Halliday and Hasan are only interested in text construction, they do not consider that exophora is cohesive, “since it does not bind the two elements together into a text⁵⁸”. But endophoric ties create the “texture⁵⁹” of a text, and among the cohesive resources identified by them is reference. Coach’s recurrent difficulties to process his interlocutor’s endophoric deictic expressions may then be seen as detrimental to the texture of the text of *Cheers*. However, as Halliday and Hasan claim, we should not have “an all-or-nothing view of texture⁶⁰” and there can be partial shifts in the context of a situation, which “is likely to be reflected in some way in the texture of the discourse, without destroying completely the continuity with what has gone before⁶¹.” This is quite clearly the case with Coach’s faulty interpretations of endophoric deictic expressions. In spite of Coach’s misfires, conversations go on, with the occasional rephrasing of the utterance that Coach has misunderstood, and in any case, with the building of ties, albeit more or less unexpected⁶², which contribute to the humor of the sitcom.

⁵⁴ Even if there are not many characters belonging to minority groups in *Cheers*—as was the case of many American TV shows of the 1980s.

⁵⁵ As Halliday and Hasan put it, “The word TEXT is used in linguistics to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole.” Halliday and Hasan, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Halliday and Hasan, p. vii.

⁵⁷ Halliday and Hasan, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Halliday and Hasan, p. 18.

⁵⁹ Halliday and Hasan, p. 11.

⁶⁰ Halliday and Hasan, p. 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² In addition to all the examples mentioned before, S01E15 features a particularly good example of humor induced by the misconstrual of the reference of backward-pointing *that*: COACH. Sam. Look at me. Do I look OK to you?

5.3 From textual to interpersonal cohesion

The cohesive ties created by Coach are at the same time unexpected and not completely surprising; they are unexpected at the level of character-to-character interactions, as has been argued in sections 3 and 4, and yet they are not completely surprising in the context of a sitcom, a genre defined by its “comic impetus⁶³”. Indeed, unexpected cohesive ties may constitute slight disruptions of the texture of the text at the character’s level, but they can be said to form an intrinsic part of the texture of the text as an aesthetic work, both from the perspective of creation and reception. In this sense, Coach both stands out of the gang and fits in the formula of the sitcom, since he makes the audience laugh, as the laugh track reveals, just like all the characters of a sitcom are supposed to.

Additionally, Coach’s misunderstanding deixis generates a sense of community in keeping with the values promoted by the show. Hilmes indeed argues that in each episode of *Cheers*, while a character’s aspirations may threaten to separate him or her from the group, “in the end the group triumphs⁶⁴” and Brown further demonstrates that *Cheers* “invites viewers into the discussions as virtual patrons of the bar⁶⁵”, therefore building a large community composed of characters and viewers alike. Though Halliday and Hasan are only interested in how endophoric ties create textual cohesion, it could be argued that endophoric deixis and exophoric deixis build *interpersonal* cohesion since they require hearers to determine what their interlocutors mean and what linguistic or extralinguistic element they refer to. If Coach often proves unable to do just that, non-cognitively impaired viewers do understand (or “hyper-understand” to use Brône’s

SAM. Yeah, why?

COACH. I just went down, to renew my driver’s license, right. They asked me to donate my kidneys.

SAM. Oh, no, no, don’t take that personal, Coach. They ask everybody.

COACH. Those highway robbers. It used to be a lousy two bucks.

⁶³ Brett Mills, *The Sitcom*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2009, p. 100.

⁶⁴ Hilmes, p. 71.

⁶⁵ Robert S. Brown, “*Cheers*: Searching for the Ideal Public Sphere in the Ideal Public House”, in *The Sitcom Reader – America Viewed and Skewed*, ed. Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2005, p. 259.

concept⁶⁶) what the intended reference of the deictic expression used is *and* Coach's disruptions.

And occasionally, Coach's misinterpretations generate key-conversations that would not have taken place otherwise, in which recurrent characters, anonymous customers and probably viewers feel they cannot *not* participate in—a perfect example of that being featured in S01E17, centered on the “will-they, won't-they” relationship between Sam and Diane:

SAM. Would you just admit that you're just hung up on me, damn it?

DIANE. I am not.

SAM. You are, too!

DIANE. I am not!

NORM. Please, do you think I'd behave like this in *your* home?

SAM. Sorry.

DIANE. Well, we are being awfully childish about this.

SAM. Well, maybe.

DIANE. Let's leave it at this. I'm rubber, and you're glue. Everything you say bounces off me and sticks to you. You love me! You love me!

SAM. I do not! [...]

CLIFF. *That* is the most embarrassing display I have ever seen.

COACH. You're absolutely right, Cliff. Anybody can look at them and see she's crazy about him.

NORM. Are you crazy? He's nuts about her!

Customers gathering around Cliff and Norm and each giving their opinion.

While Cliff probably comments on both Diane and Sam's childish behavior, Coach thinks Cliff is harshly indicting Diane's self-deception only. Coach's (mis)interpretation is then the literal starting point for an on-screen (and probably off-screen) group debate about Sam and Diane's relationship.

6. Concluding words

⁶⁶ See Brône, p. 2042: “it could be argued that recognizing the humorous potential of a misunderstanding presupposes hyper-understanding on the part of the outsider (hearer/viewer).”

Glen Charles, one of the producers of *Cheers*, said: “We tried to make Coach not so much stupid as indecisive and pursuing his own line of reasoning⁶⁷”—and indeed, Coach’s processing of language in general and deixis in particular is not absurd at all: Coach’s misinterpretations of (ana)deixis are, by and large, syntactically possible; they are “just” logically not the most likely. This character’s recurrent misunderstandings of deixis paradoxically help the audience realize that elucidating deixis is not as effortless as may seem at first glance.

Coach’s recurrent misinterpretations of deixis have several functions in *Cheers*: first, they help characterize Coach as a goofy, “simple-minded” person, recurrently unable to process language like non-cognitively-impaired people do, which sets him apart from the other characters of the show. Second, they construct Coach as a comical character, and as such, a character who is very much like the other amusing characters of the sitcom (though for different reasons). Finally, this shift from standing out to fitting in ultimately shows how *Cheers* is a community-building sitcom, whether on the diegetic level or on the audience’s level, a sitcom which aims at turning “outcasts” such as Coach into “insiders⁶⁸”.

⁶⁷ Quoted by Tom Shales, “Coach Really ‘Got ‘em,’ And He Will Be Missed”, *Chicago Tribune*, 19 February 1985, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-02-19/features/8501100295_1_character-nicholas-colasanto-glen-charles, consulted July 16th 2018.

⁶⁸ To use singer-songwriter Gary Portnoy’s own words to describe the concept of *Cheers*: “A place where someone who is invisible in the “real world” can suddenly be someone. A place where outcasts become insiders.” See Gary Portnoy, “The *Cheers* Story”, *garyportnoy.com*, <https://www.garyportnoy.com/cheers-story/>, consulted 27 September 27th, 2018.