

## FAMILY DISCOURSE IN ANIMATED SERIES

## СІМЕЙНИЙ ДИСКУРС В АНІМАЦІЙНИХ СЕРІАЛАХ

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Family is defined as 'the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children'. This definition reflects the image of the family in the animated series *American Dad!*, *F is for Family*, and *Family Guy*. There are two traditional parents in the series and two or three children. All families have pets, which make them correspond to the portrayal of a typical American family. Despite the fact that families belong to different historical periods (*F is for Family* represents a family from the 1970s, while the families from two other series belong to our times), the patriarchal style of family is predominant in each of them. This style is presented in a satirical way, often in an exaggerated one, and the viewers witness all disadvantages it may cause. The husband-wife relationships go through numerous tough situations, which makes the animated series even more realistic and close to a portray of an average family. So, husband-wife relationships are built and, if they are not ideal, the spouses try to sort the problems out. Parent-children relationships are portrayed as a failure. Parents prove to be either completely indifferent to their children's problems, ignore them – both children and their problems – or help in such an odd way that makes the situation even worse. Animated series seem to be aimed at underlining existing complications in parent-children relationships and urging the viewers to review their own relationships with children. Family communication styles depicted in the animated series are the following: authoritarian, liberal-permissive, helicoptering (towards a spouse) and detached. The last type is mostly realized in parent-child / child-parent communication. Consequently, family discourse is characterised by misunderstanding, confusion, frustration, though there are some episodes in all three animated series when the families represent a unit having the common goal and acting as a team.

**Key words:** family discourse, animated series, *American Dad!*, *F is for Family*, *Family Guy*.

Сім'я визначається як «основна одиниця суспільства, яка традиційно складається з двох батьків, які виховують своїх дітей». Це визначення відображає образ сім'ї в мультиплікаційних серіалах «Американський тато!», «F – сім'я» та «Сімейний хлопець». У серіалах двоє традиційних батьків і двоє-троє дітей. У всіх сім'ях є домашні тварини, що робить їх відповідними зображенню типової американської сім'ї. Незважаючи на те, що сім'ї належать до різних історичних періодів (*F is for Family* сім'я з 1970-х років, а сім'ї з двох інших серій – нашого часу), у кожній з них домінує патріархальний стиль сім'ї. Цей стиль подається в сатиричному ключі, часто в перебільшеному вигляді, і глядач стає свідком усіх недоліків, які такий стиль може спричинити. Стосунки між чоловіком і дружиною проходять через безліч складних ситуацій, що робить мультиплікаційні серіали ще більш реалістичними і наближеними до зображення звичайної сім'ї. Отже, стосунки між чоловіком і дружиною вибудовуються, і якщо вони не ідеальні, подружжя намагається вирішити проблеми. Відносини батьків і дітей зображуються як невдалі. Батьки виявляються або абсолютно байдужими до проблем своїх дітей, ігнорують їх – і дітей, і їхні проблеми – або допомагають у такий дивний спосіб, що це тільки погіршує ситуацію. Мультиплікаційні серіали начебто спрямовані на те, щоб підкреслити наявні складності у стосунках батьків і дітей і спонукати глядачів переглянути власні стосунки з дітьми. Стилі сімейного спілкування, зображені в мультсеріалі, такі: авторитарний, ліберально-м'який, надтурботливий (по відношенню до чоловіка) і відсторонений. Останній тип здебільшого реалізується у спілкуванні батьків і дітей. Отже, сімейний дискурс характеризується непорозумінням, плутаниною, розчаруванням, хоча в усіх трьох мультиплікаційних серіалах є деякі епізоди, коли сім'ї представляють єдине ціле, яке має спільну мету та діє як команда.

**Ключові слова:** сімейний дискурс, анімаційні серіали, *American Dad!*, *F is for Family*, *Family Guy*.

**Introduction.** Family discourse is the specific type of discourse as almost everyone interacts with other family members and consequently has experienced all benefits and drawbacks of such interactions learning to adjust to other family members' communication style and simultaneously working out their own communication strategies in order to achieve the desired communicative goals in interactions as well as to learn how to minimize mis-

communications. As for family discourse realized in animate series, it is supposed to reflect everyday communication among family members, yet being created by screen writers, family discourse in animated series is often beyond traditional expectations and beliefs about power and roles in the family. The aim of the article is to trace family discourse presented in the animated series *American Dad!* *Family Guy*, *F is for Family*.

**Literature Overview.** Television animated series aimed at the adult audience have been on the screen since the late 1940s and they have always had clear cultural narratives as well as ideological and political. *Television has such a permeating and profound impact on its viewers and it is important to understand on what scale this impact reaches audiences and how certain television programs go about achieving this influence with their audiences, be it intentional or not* [13].

At present there is a great number of animated series for adults on television. Most of them are series about family lives [2]: *American Dad!*, *Bob's Burgers*, *The Cleveland Show*, *The Deeskins*, *F is for Family*, *Family Guy*, *The Harper House*, *Kevin Spencer*, *The Oblongs*, and many others. R.F. Taflinger [11] describes features of family comedy sitcoms and the audience's reaction as the following: 1) the set is in the house, which is usually a comfortable middle-class dwelling; 2) the plot is based on the relationships of family members; 3) *most of the characters in a situation comedy are sympathetic. The audience can identify with them and their problems and care whether or not they can solve the problems* 4) *to provide necessary conflict there is at least one character, usually a supporting character but occasionally a transient, who is unsympathetic. ... The villain is not always a villain, though.* Family members of sitcoms have come into the viewers' lives as role models even when some family troubles are exaggerated they are accepted by the audience as something familiar and acceptable.

In most animated series there is a nuclear family with clearly cut patriarchal values, where the husband is a breadwinner and the wife is a homemaker. Such a model presents an ideal picture which has been cultivated for many years on television and in the society. Still, families from animated series cannot but reflect social changes and the shift in social roles of family members, as well as communication strategies used by adults and children.

Family conversations over dinner time clearly demonstrate who has more power in the family with children having less secure positions but at the same time learning to socialize and talk copying their parents' conversational models [3] as during spoken family interaction *family roles are constructed, refuted, and negotiated by the interactants* [8].

Family discourse is family members' communication characterized by particular power and hierarchy some member of the family can have, which depends on age, gender, type of the family, closeness of family members and some other external factors [5]. Family discourse includes different types of discourse

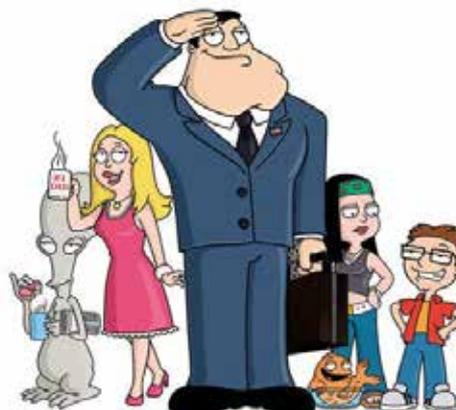
- 1) matrimonial discourse (husband-wife interaction),
- 2) parental discourse (parents-children interaction),
- 3) sibling discourse (brother-sister interaction).

**Family communication styles.** Family styles of communication and consequently family discourse can be presented as the following:

- authoritarian – it is outlined by the strong position of a father or both parents, with his / their strong leadership position and suppression of other family members' viewpoints;
- liberal-permissive – it is defined by lack of clear rules and a great deal of permissiveness which often leads to ignoring other family members' viewpoints;
- helicopter parenting – it is marked by hyper care about a spouse or / and a child / children, which drives to their constant dependence on other family members and impracticality and impossibility to make their own decisions;
- attitude of detachment – it is represented by indifference to a spouse or / and a child / children, which makes family members complete strangers;
- democratic – it is indicated by more or less equal position of all family members, which results in healthy relationships.

It should be acknowledged that real family's communication cannot correspond to any pure family type mentioned above, they usually represent a mixture of several types whereas fictional families can be portrayed like that, though families in the animated series tend to be portrayed close to real ones, especially in the series in question. So, it means that communication style in those families is intertwined.

**American Dad!** The animated series presents the life of an upper middle-class family of four, parents and two children, having an unusual goldfish and an alien with unusual possibilities (see Picture 1 [1]).



Picture 1. *American Dad!*'s main characters

Stan Smith's communication style is pure authoritarian. Although such style often pushes him into even more complicated situations, he cannot but transfer his CIA agent's role into family relationships. Francine Smith's communication style is a combination of different styles. Being a housewife at the present, depending on her husband and sometimes copying her husband's behaviour, she tends to use an authoritarian style. At the same time being a hippie in the past turning to her past views about freedom and being brought by Chinese parents, Francine proves to be quite liberal-permissive. Their children, Hayley and Steve, are more inclined to be detached, specially from their father, as his help usually brings in even more trouble.

When their family goes on the trip to China, 14-year-old Steve wants to share his excitement with father but the latter refuses to share the feelings of his son and expresses his annoyance and intolerance directly:

**Steve:** *Isn't this great, Dad? We're gonna be able to see the Great Wall and eat Chinese food without fortune cookies at the end of our meal. It'll be weird at first, but who cares, we're going to China!*

**Stan:** *(monotone) Steve, I'm driving my non-athlete, non-fraternity-hazing son [...] to school and I just learned that he's going to a place more polluted than the minds of every American liberal combined. Do not test me.*

Stan's communication is far from being supportive and caring. Even worse, he insults Steve, stressing his weak sides. Additionally, he applies his manner of behavior as a CIA agent into communication with his family. When the Smiths have a family dinner, Stan keeps talking about some *secret mission* but he does in such a way that reveals his lack of intelligence.

**Stan:** *(smiles, proud) I've been on a mission. The most secret mission of all missions I've ever had, as a mission.*

**Steve:** *(immature) Oh boy, did you beat the bad guys, daddio?*

*Stan cringes.*

**Stan:** *Steve, go to your room.*

**Hayley:** *Dad, how can it be such a secret if you just told us?*

**Stan:** *Never mind that, then.*

*(sweats) The real secret is how does your mother make such delicious breakfasts!*

**Francine:** *Stan, you haven't even eaten.*

*Stan pretends to chew.*

**Stan:** *(to himself, fake chewing) Mmm. Imaginary bacon... So...delicious... must... leave... the...table*

The situation itself shows that family members are not interested in communication with each other.

Family conversations at the dinner table give no satisfaction to any from the family and finally Stan leaves the table without sharing his feelings with his wife and children.

**F is for Family.** The animated series is considered to be quite realistic [12] depicting a typical American family from the 1970s as well as sketching historic period described as when *you could smack your kid, smoke inside, and bring a gun to the airport* [9]. The family of five to say nothing about the dog (See Picture 2 [6]) represents an average American family going through rough times caused by social and economic changes in the society.

The communication style of the family is not diverse, it is a mixture of authoritarian and detached communication style of the father's and detached of the mother's and children's.

Frank, the head of Murphy's family tend to abuse family members emotionally, verbally and physically quite often. When talking to his children, he does not even try to choose appropriate vocabulary to express his feeling of annoyance. Instead, he uses swear words to hurt his offspring's feelings.

The following excerpt depicts a scene where Frank and his 15-year-old son Kevin are watching TV in the hall. When their choice of TV program does not coincide, Frank starts humiliating his son, emphasizing the fact that only he has the power to make decisions in the family. Moreover, he tries to abuse his son emotionally when he ridicules Kevin's haircut. Nevertheless, Kevin does not see an authority figure in his father and consider Frank's job worthless (*You're just a baggage handler*).

**Kevin:** *How can you watch this? It's barbaric.*

**Frank:** *(impressed) It's art. Beautiful, beautiful art.*

**(Asian character on TV:** *Agh! My skin is bubbling.)*

**Frank:** *(smug) Hey, I got an idea. If you don't like this, go to your room and watch what you want on **YOUR TV**. Oh, that's right! You don't have one 'cause it's my f\*cking house, ha-ha!*



Picture 2. F is for Family's main characters

**Kevin:** *Ah, that's real funny Dad! You know what else is funny?*

**Frank:** *Aside from your haircut, what?*

**Kevin:** *This! (throws Frank the TV catalogue)*

**Frank:** *(shocked) Bella Abzug!?*

**Kevin:** *No. (pulls out his failure notice) This!*

**Frank:** *(angry) What the hell is this?*

**Sue:** *(stern) Kevin!*

**Frank:** *(furious) He's flunking out and you knew about this?!*

**Sue:** *(calmly) I wanted your food to settle.*

**Frank:** *(outraged) Unbelievable. Unbelievable! You got one job, pay attention and pass your classes!*

**Kevin:** *(acting like a smartass) That's TWO jobs!*

**Frank:** *No son of mine's gonna flunk out.*

**Kevin:** *I don't care. I hate school.*

**Frank:** *Well, I hate my life, but I keep on doing it! I got a mortgage, I got dependents, and I gotta go downtown every damn day to run that airport!*

**Kevin:** *Please, you're just a baggage handler.*

*[Frank stops for a brief moment while everyone else gets nervous about what Frank is going to do next]*

**Frank:** *(sternly) What the f\*ck did you just call me?!*

On top of that, Frank expresses verbally his intentions to abuse physically his prepubescent son Bill, if something goes wrong, when Frank asks him to look after his younger sister Maureen, whom Frank always refers to as princess.

**Frank:** *I need you two to play nice, and don't get into any trouble. (to Bill) And I am putting you in charge of your sister today. You got that?*

**Bill:** *Yep.*

**Frank:** *Okay, if anything bad happens to her, I want you to call me at work. Okay, buddy?*

**Bill:** *Sure, dad.*

**Frank:** *Good. 'Cause then, I will come right home, and I will put you through that f\*cking wall. (Bill becomes shocked) Have a great day, Princess.*

The given excerpt emphasises a great contrast between father's attitude towards his son and daughter. Apparently, Maureen is the only child who is treated adequately in Murphy's family.

**Family Guy.** The animated series is a parody of an American life. It is often compared with The Simpsons, and the latter has far more favourable reviews. Still, Family Guy has its unique features [4]: *the downfall of the nuclear family (challenging the parental role model, introducing the infant's world of purity, naïveté, and incapacity), the downfall of the social order (law enforcement as an arbitrary exercise of power, and the stupidity and humor of the social contract), the nature of reality (my mind ver-*

*sus other minds), information as power (the role of the media and news anchors), ethical standards, the play of language, yada, yada, yada, and provocative story-telling [10] often dealing with comments on different social, political, religious, racist issues. The family looks typical: two parents, three children and a dog (see picture 3 [7]), though a dog that talks is not quite 'typical' as well as a baby who is the smartest in the family.*

The mixture of family communication style is presented by father's authoritarian style of interaction, which is softened by a helicopter attitude towards him by his devoted wife, mother's liberal-permissive attitude to children and attitude of attachment of the youngest son, who is a genius but due to his young age is not understood by others.

The way Peter Griffin, the head of Griffins' family, communicates with his teenage daughter Meg reveals the fact that Peter is also an abusive father in his manner of speech. While Meg, as a typical teenager, has a very strong desire for attention, Peter does not care about her interests and has no respect to her at all.

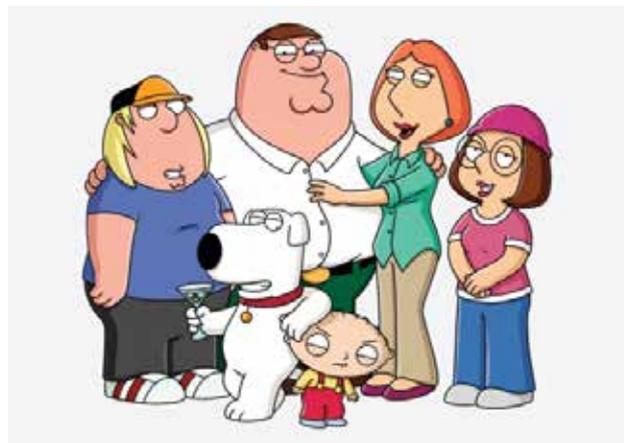
**Meg:** *Okay. Dad, you'll never guess what happen to me today. First Neil Goldman didn't show up for school today, which is like a dream come true because he's always asking me out and is sooo annoying; then Connie Domico invited me over to her house for a slumber party because she's celebrating because she got accepted to the college she wanted, then, Craig Hoffman asked me out again, and this time it means more to me because I'm myself and not the product of some desperate makeover.*

**Peter:** *Meg.*

**Meg:** *Yeah Dad?*

**Peter:** *Shut up. Can't you see? Men are talking. (Turns back to Brian and hands him the TiVo controller.) Here you go, Brian. Enjoy.*

However, the above-mentioned disrespect in Griffin family is mutual since Meg does not lis-



Picture 3. Family Guy's main characters

ten to her parents too. When Peter asks her to turn down the music, he does it just because he has to do it. He knows it won't affect the situation but he has to fulfill his parental responsibilities. On the whole, Meg treats her parents the way they treat her.

*Peter (pokes his head in the room): Hey Meg. Your mother wanted me to tell you to turn down the music.*

*(Meg looks at Peter like she's going to beat him up again).*

*Peter (Closes the door a little): If not. That's cool.*

The episode demonstrates parent-child communication as a failure. And though it is the father's responsibility to talk to his daughter, to set the rules

for family members in order to co-exist in a comfortable way, Peter prefers to avoid conflicts and talks to Meg about loud music only on behalf of his wife. He himself would rather not communicate with his daughter on controversial issues.

**Conclusion.** The animated series for adults portraying typical families, revealing problems in relationships of family members, reflect possible communication styles of ordinary families. Problematic situations depicted in the fictional world are often exaggerated. However, the run time of all three animated series proves the fact that they are popular among viewers and that fictional characters correspond to viewers' expectations.

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