



A Study on the Verbal Humor in Sitcom *Friends* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract. Humor is an important spice in life and has long been the subject of research in many academic fields, including linguistics. The Cooperative Principle is a set of theories based on four maxims, which are the leading principles for generating a complete conversation between speakers. Violation of any of these four maxims results in the formation of conversational meanings, and thus linguistic humor. This article briefly introduces the main elements of the Cooperative Principle in pragmatics and its limitation and uses the script of the American TV sitcom *Friends* as an example. The author introduces the definition of sitcoms and a brief introduction to *Friends*. The article analyzes in detail the process of humor produced by the actors in the play by violating the cooperative principle, to improve readers' understanding of the internal laws of English language humor. The process of humor produced by actors who violate the cooperative principle is analyzed in detail. The author found through the analysis that the principle of cooperation can be widely applied to discourse analysis, such as the element of humor.

Keywords: Verbal humor · Cooperative Principle · *Friends*

1 Introduction

Sitcoms originated from the radio play in the 1920s and were brought to the screen after World War II when the Videoland boomed and at the same time promoted the development of sitcoms. Today, sitcoms have followed the wave of globalization from the U.S. to the rest of the world and have been embraced by people all over the world.

Sitcoms are well known but difficult to define precisely, and Feuer believes the definition has changed over time. Reed defines sitcoms as “light comedies” that recreate life scenes and can be divided into three steps: the first step is the opening, the second is the intensification of the conflict, and the final is the dramatic resolution of the conflict. The stories in the dramas are usually based on humor, recreating anecdotes from around the world, and each episode lasts about thirty minutes [11].

The classification of sitcoms also varies; Hartley classifies sitcoms into family sitcoms and workplace sitcoms based on the different places where they take place [12], while Taflinger classifies sitcoms into action comedy, domestic comedy, and dramatic comedy based on their themes [13]. According to the classification of the two scholars, *Friends* belongs to the indoor family sitcom.

2 The Cooperative Principle

Grice did not write any monographs in his life, and only in 1987 he edited and published a collection of 19 papers and speeches, among which there are many classic pioneering works such as the paper “Logic and Conversation”, which was first published in 1975, and in which he proposed the famous “The Cooperative Principle”. The purpose of the paper was not to propose a theory of conversation, but to address the question of how to analyze the semantics of natural language. It is known that Russell wanted to eliminate through logical analysis the negative effects that everyday usage of language brings to philosophy and logic, and that illogical definitions indicate that everyday language is flawed. Unlike Russell, Grice wants to discover the characteristics of everyday language by analyzing it, and then find its integration with philosophy. In other words, logical analysis can only solve part of the semantic problems of everyday language, and the extra part needs to be solved by new means (e.g., pragmatics).

Grice proposed the theory of “extra-verbal meaning” to solve the problem. Any meaning that cannot be solved by logical semantic theory needs to be solved by the theory of “extra-verbal meaning”. There are various kinds of extra-verbal meanings, among which the prominent one is “conversational meaning”. Conversational implicature is a kind of meaning derived by people according to whether conversational principles (such as cooperative principle, politeness principle, etc.) are observed. It is a pragmatic meaning that changes with the change of context. Grice has proposed a theoretical framework for addressing the relationship between logic and natural language, and between semantics and pragmatics, which has led to a series of related studies. Grice argues that in all linguistic communication activities in order to achieve a specific goal, there is a tacit agreement between the speaker and the hearer, a principle that both parties should follow, which he calls the cooperative principle of conversation, and which he specifically explains as: Make your conversational contribution such as is required, the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged. He believes that adherence to the principle of cooperation is the basis for making a conversation effective. At the same time he specifically analyzes the four maxims contained in this principle.

According to Grice, a general principle can often be divided into several specific maxim and sub-maxims. Grice uses Kant’s list of categories “quality” “quantity” “relation” and “manner” as reference. The four categories of “quality,” “quantity,” “relation,” and “manner” are named in Kant’s “List of Categories,” and four corresponding maxims are constructed under the principle of cooperation, each with several sub-maxims. These four principles are not only for the speaker to follow, but also for the listener to potentially follow. This has been proven by people in numerous communication practices. They are.

a. The maxim of quantity:

- (1) The words spoken should contain the information needed for the purpose of the conversation.
- (2) What is said should not contain more information than is needed.

When talking, the maxim of quantity specifies the amount of information provided in our discourse. According to Grice, when two parties in a conversation communicate, the amount of information provided in the discourse should be neither more nor less than the amount of information needed by the other party, which should not include what the other party does not expect.

b. The maxim of quality

- (1) Don't say things you know to be false.
- (2) Don't say things with insufficient evidence.

In conversational communication, the qualitative maxim requires people to tell the truth when they speak, not to say something false or to say something without sufficient evidence.

c. The maxim of relation: Be relevant and fit the topic.

According to Grice, in conversational communication, the content of the conversation should be connected, the words spoken should be relevant, and nothing should be said that is not connected to the topic.

d. The maxim of manner: To understand clearly.

- (1) Be understandable and avoid obscurity.
- (2) Be clear and avoid ambiguity.
- (3) Be concise and avoid lengthiness.
- (4) Be well organized and avoid clutter.

According to Grice, people in conversational communication want their partners to be able to speak clearly about the message or thing they want to say, and to avoid long and verbose expressions as much as possible.

However, people do not always abide by the "cooperative principle" in actual verbal communication, and they may deliberately violate it when necessary. Grice refers to the extra-verbal meaning that arises from the apparently deliberate violation of the "cooperative principle" as "special conversational meaning. The "special conversational meaning" explains how the listener understands the meaning of the speaker's words through their surface meaning, and thus expresses a different meaning, which is often when humor arises.

3 The Limitation of Cooperative Principle

There is nothing perfect in the world, and Grice's cooperative principle has also been fiercely criticized by many parties amid the praise, which shows that the cooperation principle also has its own limitations, mainly in the following aspects:

First, lack of universality. The principle of cooperation is not truth, and it lacks the universality. It is mainly used to derive the special meaning of discourse, while less attention is paid to the general meaning of natural language. On the other hand, from

the perspective of the scope of application of the cooperative principle, the cooperative principle focuses on the study of daily spoken language, and has poor explanatory power on literary language.

Second, the concept is vague. Grice defines the principle of cooperation as "providing appropriate words according to the change of the purpose or direction of the conversation you participate in when participating in the conversation". But what is "cooperation" and what is "appropriateness", these crucial terms have failed to define their connotation and extension, which is also an important reason for controversy.

Third, the lack of pragmatic reasoning mechanism, poor explanatory power. Cooperative principle conveys conversational implicature by the speaker deliberately violating or using a certain criterion, and also makes the hearer know that the speaker deliberately violates a certain rule, and then the speaker can know the discourse implicature transmitted by the other party. Therefore, the reasoning process is regarded as a deliberate or conscious thinking process, which often ignores the naturalness and unconsciousness of understanding. Therefore, it is impossible to make a scientific and appropriate explanation for language phenomena such as ambiguity, metaphor, irony and so on. Due to the lack of pragmatic reasoning mechanism, people feel that the principle of cooperation is more arbitrary, which greatly weakens its explanatory power.

Fourth, the guidelines are too general. Explanation can easily lead to the loss of one thing or another. Xu Shenghuan believes that the various guidelines of the cooperation principle are so general that anything can be introduced according to the meaning on a certain occasion; in fact, the cooperation principle is only a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the derivation of the meaning. In addition, when deriving the meaning of a conversation, it is often necessary to comply with the cooperation principle in a way that violates it, and one loses sight of the other. Moreover, there is crossover and overlap among the guidelines, which is not very operative.

Fifth, not enough attention is paid to the context. If the two parties have more common knowledge, the more accurate and easier it is to deduce the meaning of the conversation, and the communication is easy to achieve success. If the communicative parties meet each other in person, the difficulty of communication is greater, and it may even lead to the failure of communication.

4 CP and Verbal Humor in *Friends*

The Cooperative Principle, the core idea of Grice's principle, has been in the hands of philosophers, linguists, ethicists, psychologists, and cognitive scientists, and has been questioned, critiqued, interpreted, revised, modified, and even replaced by scholars at the time and since, after a long period of time and facts. It is still "one of the most important basic theories in the field of pragmatics." [11] We can see its theoretical and philosophical contributions to pragmatics and related disciplines, and it can be said that the Cooperative Principle has an irreplaceable position and role in the theoretical system of pragmatics. In order to further elaborate the role of the Cooperative Principle in verbal humor, the authors deliberately conducted a case study in this part to illustrate it through concrete examples. As the authors mentioned before, when any of the four maxims are violated, then conversational cues are created and subsequently verbal humor is produced.

Many scholars, including Grice himself, have repeatedly deliberated and expressed doubts about these maxims, so this paper will not examine which one is necessary or what is more important, but in this paper the author focuses on the specific cases of verbal humor when these maxims are violated in the context of the corpus. Grice proposed that the maxims of the Cooperative Principle are intended to “explain why people are able to understand and express what they mean beyond what they say”, which is a general rule of conversation, and that compliance with the Cooperative Principle and its guidelines is seen as “reasonable” [12]. However, he also notes the violation of maxims and summarizes some of the ways in which a speaker may fail to comply with them, such as: he may violate them “secretly”; he may deliberately withdraw from the principle of cooperation and not cooperate as required; or he may face conflicts and be unable to comply with different maxims at the same time. As the authors mentioned before, when any of the four maxims are violated, then conversational cues are created and subsequently verbal humor is produced. This part focuses at the Cooperative Principle and the production of verbal humor in the context of the corpus.

5 Violation of the Quantitative Maxim in *Friends*

Example 1:

Janice: Oh! What is that on your finger? I am blind. So, who is the lucky guy?

Monica: Oh, it is a funny story.

Janice met Monica at the restaurant where she worked and surprised to see the engagement ring on her hand, immediately asked who her fiancé was. But Monica replied without mentioning her fiancé’s name and without any intention to introduce him to her, clearly violating the maxim of quantity in the Cooperation Principle. So, what was her reason for doing so? Because her fiancé Chandler is none other than Janice’s ex-boyfriend, and Chandler avoids Janice, if Monica gives a straightforward answer, it will put herself and the other party in an awkward predicament, so Monica chooses to violate the maxim of quantity to temporarily cover up the awkward scene, and the audience who knows the truth will deeply appreciate Monica’s feelings at that time and cannot help but laugh.

Example 2:

Monica: There’s nothing to tell! He is just some guy I work with!

Joey: Come on, you are going out with the guy! There’s gotta be something wrong with him!

Chandler: All right Joey, be nice. So does he have a hump? A hump and a hairpiece?

Monica’s male colleague is not liked by people, so Joey directly expresses his opinion that this is a man with problems, but Chandler asks if this man is hunchbacked and wears a wig as a kind of sarcasm, Chandler’s heart knows that the truth is that this man is not hunchbacked and does not wear a wig, but is just a kind of prejudice against people he hates and speaks false information. It is a false message. Obviously, this is a violation of the Maxim of Quality, which has the effect of making the audience laugh.

6 Violation of the Quality Maxim in *Friends*

Example 1:

Monica: (Louis Posen) He was my best friend in fifth grade. One day, I asked him to be my boyfriend and he said no. Do you know why?

Chandler: Because you kept talking to him while he was trying to go to the bathroom?

Chandler was using the bathroom at home, and Monica was telling him stories about her student relationships through the bathroom door, mentioning that she had once been rejected by a boy she was courting, and then stopped to ask Chandler: "Do you know why?" Chandler replied, "Because you kept talking to him while he was trying to go to the bathroom?" Obviously, Chandler's answer is a violation of quality maxim, and no one would believe that a boy would reject a girl simply because she talked to him while he was in the bathroom. In fact, Chandler is not ignorant, but he breaks the maxim of quality in order to politely remind Monica that she is in the bathroom and is not comfortable talking to people, and Monica, who reads the meaning of the reply, realizes the funny nature of her behavior. It is Chandler's violation of the quality maxim that creates the humorous effect.

Example 2:

Rachel: All right. What is your news, Amy?

Amy: Oh! Umm...well...I'm getting married.

Rachel: What? Oh my God! To who?

Amy: This guy!

In this classic dialogue in *Friends*, Rachel suddenly learned that her sister Amy was about to get married, so Rachel asked her sister who she married. According to normal logic, when she learned that her sister was married, she must ask the person's name, age and other information, but in the sitcom, her sister Amy chose to get married not because of love, but because the other party had money and a car, So Amy doesn't care about other information about this marriage partner. My sister Amy's answer did not provide enough information for the conversation. Her answer was tantamount to not saying, which violated the maxim of quantity, making this dialogue humorous.

7 Violation of the Relation Maxim in *Friends*

Example 1:

Phoebe: (to Monica) So have you decided on a band for the wedding? Because you know, I am kind of musical.

Rachael: Phoebe, she just got engaged a couple of hours ago. I doubt she even has time for this.

Phoebe: Speaking of chiming in, remember the time you burned down my apartment?

Rachael: (to Monica) Yeah, you are on your own.

Phoebe is very keen on guitar playing, and is addicted to the process of writing and acting by himself, but everyone agrees that his works are not flattering, but due to friendship, they are embarrassed to tell him the truth, and in most cases, they can only politely refuse to watch his performance with objective circumstances. In this scenario, when Monica announced her engagement to everyone, Phoebe couldn't wait to offer

to play at her wedding. Rachel said, “ she just got engaged a couple of hours ago. I doubt she even has time for this.” Rachel’s answer didn’t seem to have anything to do with Phoebe’s question, but he helped Monica gently refuse Phoebe’s request by breaking the relation maxim. Of course, the smart Phoebe read Rachel’s reply, but he didn’t respond directly after hearing it, but said to Rachel, “ remember the time you burned down my apartment?” This sentence seems to have nothing to do with the topic. It’s incomprehensible, but it’s an indirect but powerful counterattack for Rachel. The implication is: “you burned down my house, and you owe me! I won’t care about you. Not only are you not grateful, but you also bite the hand that feeds you and destroys my good deeds?” Rachel felt guilty immediately after hearing this, so she knew it was difficult to leave, and then told Monica, “ Yeah, you are on your own.” This dialogue is exactly what Phoebe’s seemingly “answer is not what he asked” amused the audience.

Example 2:

Chandler: Tuna or egg salad? Decide!

Ross: I will have whatever Christine is having.

In this conversation, Chandler asked Ross whether he would like tuna or egg salad, but Ross was immersed in his emotions and talked selfishly, which was irrelevant. Therefore, this violated the relation maxim and created a sense of humor in the plot.

8 Violation of the Manner Maxim in *Friends*

Example 1:

Chandler: There was something we wanted to tell you about the wedding. It is going to be a small ceremony.

Monica: It is actually going to be just family.

Janice: Wait. You two think of me as family?

Chandler and Monica are going to hold an engagement ceremony, because they want to avoid Chandler’s ex-girlfriend Janice, so they try to refuse her to come to their wedding. But in order to maintain her self-esteem, they didn’t directly and clearly tell her, but euphemistically said, “It is going to be a small ceremony. It is actually going to be just family.” they hope that the other party can understand the meaning of their reply, Auto exit. But Jennice didn’t speculate on the profound meaning. She didn’t know that their real purpose was not to let her participate in the engagement ceremony, so she unexpectedly said “Wait. You two think of me as family?”, and then expressed gratitude. It was her misunderstanding of the meaning of the conversation that made Monica and her husband speechless and irrefutable, and made the audience burst out laughing.

Example 2:

Ross: You know, and...and it is not like I didn’t try, Rachel, but things got in the way, you know? Like, like Italian guys or ex-fiancés or, or Italian guys.

Rachel: Hey, there was one Italian guy, Ok, and do you even have a point?

Ross found that Rachel liked him, and his heart was both happy and contradictory, because he also liked Rachel, but he just talked about his new girlfriend, and then he had the above conversation. Ross mentioned the Italian man Rachel had met twice in the conversation, and it was long and wordy, so that Rachel didn’t know what he meant to express, which violated the manner maxim, but it was this kind of words that violated the manner maxim, So that Ross’ ambivalence can be displayed.

9 Conclusion

Humor, an extremely interesting and complicated phenomenon, has become the major research topic of many scholars from various disciplines. Numerous amazing contributions have been made in this field. Since 1980's, studies of the humorous phenomenon has begun to attract researchers' attention. Later researches based on linguistic theories begin to flourish. The Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice is just such a theory in point. Based on CP, sometimes the addresser goes against the maxims intentionally for the sake of conversational implicature, however, the addressee is asked to be aware of these overtones and to infer the implied meanings of humorous utterances. The four maxims not only provide a theoretical foundation for analyzing verbal humor, but also serve as a mechanism to deal with how humorous speeches are realized and interpreted. This thesis pays attention to the verbal humor appeared in American sitcom Friends, and makes a thorough analysis based on the influential pragmatic theory - Grice's Cooperative Principle. In this thesis, the author points out the important role the CP and its four maxims play in the process of generating and interpreting humorous utterances. The corpus of this study comes from the sitcom Friends, which is full of humorous conversations.

Through the analysis of verbal humor in Friends, it is found that the Cooperative Principle and its four basic maxims can be widely used in interpreting the generation and appreciation of verbal humor. Furthermore, the violation of each maxim or sub-maxim of the CP can give rise to humorous effect.

Although the author tries the best to complete this task, there are still some aspects to be further studied due to the limitations of time and space. Due to limited capacity, the authors selected only one perspective for analysis and did not examine the verbal humor generated by adherence to the Cooperative Principle. Also, the authors only applied the Cooperative Principle theory and did not link other relevant theories. Therefore, the further study can make a detailed discussion about verbal humor from more perspectives.

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