



# An Analysis of the Causes of Verbal Humor in American Sitcom from the Perspective of Pragmatics—Take *The Big Bang Theory* as an Example

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**Abstract.** Sitcom has been a popular comedy show across the world. Funny can be the biggest reason for its popularity. So how can the conversations in sitcom be so humorous? The paper makes a pragmatic analysis of the verbal humor in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory (Season 1)*. Pragmatics focuses on the relationship between the context and the meaning of discourses. Cooperative principle is one of the famous theories under the framework of pragmatics. Therefore, cooperative principle and the concept of implicature closely associated with it would be the main theory in the analysis. With the help of existing research on them, this paper would dig deeper into the process and the mechanism of making humorous effect and offer some help for people to understand and appreciate verbal humor in English. And it is found that humor is generated by deliberately or unconsciously violating the CP and giving rise to conversation implicature. Through this paper, we can have a better knowledge of the wonder of language and command some talking skills.

**Keywords:** verbal humor · sitcom · cooperative principle · pragmatic analysis

## 1 Introduction

Humor is a common phenomenon in our daily life. Generally speaking, it means something funny and amusing. Nowadays, with the increasingly fast pace of the overall society, people tend to feel more stressful. Thus, people pay more attention to sense of humor to relieve the pressure.

But what leads to humor? Actually humor is a complex phenomenon. Researchers have studied it from various perspectives and generally concluded several deviations that cause humor: sound-oriented deviation, lexis-oriented deviation, syntax-oriented deviation and pragmatics-oriented deviation. In this paper, humor will be analyzed from the perspective of pragmatics and the popular American Sitcom *The Big Bang Theory (Season 1)* will be taken as the example.

*The Big Bang Theory* is a very popular American sitcom. There are altogether 12 seasons and is admired by a lot of audience both at home and abroad. Its great success

results from many factors, for instance, the diversity of scenes, the wonderfulness that people can seldom experience in daily life, precious friendship, etc. Of course, verbal humor is no doubt one of these factors.

Verbal humor is mostly dependent on language. So, why is the language so funny in a sitcom? This paper will illustrate this problem from the perspective of pragmatics, and mainly focus on the mechanism of Cooperative Principle. Pragmatics is the study of meaning in context. It deals with particular utterances in particular situations and is especially concerned with the various ways in which many social contexts of language performance can influence interpretation [1]. Under the framework of pragmatics, Cooperative Principle, which will be applied in this paper is of great importance.

With pragmatics, this paper will mainly focus on several questions: How is the verbal humor achieved in sitcoms? What would happen if the hearer fail to get the meaning of the speaker? Is it feasible for us to increase our sense of humor by learning some talking skills from analyzing these theories and apply them to our daily talking?

This paper would have great significance in many areas. For example, with the understanding of the inner mechanism of verbal language, people can producing humor during a conversation at the appropriate time, and command the degree of humor better. Besides, this mechanism can also be applied to classroom teaching to improve the teaching atmosphere.

## **2 Review of Literature**

### **2.1 What is Humor Under the Framework of Pragmatics?**

When it comes to the analysis of humor, it's inevitable that we need to understand what is humor. Humor is a highly academic science which belongs to the research category of linguistics. The practice of it can be dated back to thousands years ago and the study of it is relatively complex because of its interdisciplinarity. For example, it is connected with psychology, sociology, linguistics, literature, film studies, etc. From the perspective of pragmatics, a humorous text is a perlocution which aims to amuse its hearer [2].

### **2.2 Reviews on Studies of How Can Some Pragmatic Theories Lead to Humor**

Verbal humor refers to humor performed by language. When it comes to humor caused by pragmatics, pragmatic deviation can produce humor. The pragmatic deviation, hooking itself to the larger extralinguistic domains of social and cultural realities and to the need to interpret negotiated communicative meaning against the setting of the context, in an even larger sense makes the content expressed catchy and noticeable in addition to its foregrounding effect on the language itself at the textual level [3]. Scholars both at home and abroad have done many research on it. According to George Yule, pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning as a communicated by a speaker (or writer) and interpreted by a listener (or reader). Pragmatics is the study of meaning in context, and verbal humor is a special type of communication, which mainly depends on context. So there is no doubt that there is a close connection between the two concepts. When referring to verbal humor from the perspective of pragmatics, scholars like J.L Austin,

H.P. Grice, Sperber&Wilson, Levison, Leech, etc. are all prominent in this field. They have made great contribution and the following two are some of their specific fruits.

### **Presupposition**

During the process of a conversation, most speakers have the tendency to assume certain information is already known by their listeners. That is a presupposition---something the speaker assumes to be the case prior to making an utterance. [4] It can be classified into semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. Semantic presuppositions hinge on the meaning of the words written/spoken to trigger presupposed information (Schmid, 2001), pragmatic presuppositions as Caffi (1993) asserts, cannot be drawn from the meaning of words, or in something already acknowledged; instead, they exist in something that the speaker or writer had activated, or in something which is assumed as such. Presupposition features mutual knowledge, defeasibility and appropriateness, etc. [5] According to Yao Yao, it is feasible to use presupposition to analyze the verbal humor in sitcoms and mutual knowledge and defeasibility are key points that can produce humorous atmosphere [6].

### **Speech Act Theory**

The speech act theory originated with the Oxford philosopher J.L Austin in *How to Do Things with Words*. He defined speech acts as all things we do with words when we speak. Besides the concept of performative utterances and constative utterances, he also put forward a theory of the illocutionary act, which includes locutionary act (the act of conveying literal meaning by means of syntax, lexicon and phonology), illocutionary act (the act of expressing the speaker's intention) and perlocutionary act(the act performed by or resulting from saying something). Definitely, the speech act theory can also produce humor. The three acts mentioned would work simultaneously during a conversation, so sometimes if the hearer misunderstands the true meaning or intention of the speaker, humor would be produced. [7].

## **3 Theoretical Concepts and Methodology**

This paper would mainly use cooperative principle and the conversation implicature as theoretical concepts.

Cooperative principle was proposed by Oxford philosopher H.P Grice in 1967. According to him, people would comply with some rules during a communication intentionally or unconsciously to make a conversation successfully. He put forward four maxims of cooperative principles: the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner.[8] Each of the four maxims has some submaxims. In principle, people should cooperate to obey these maxims to achieve the best effect of conversation. However, people sometimes accidentally or intentionally violate them in reality. The aim of this violation, generally speaking, is to attract the attention of the listener. Under this circumstance, the hearer should still convince himself that the speaker is still observing the cooperative principle. At the same time, combined with the context, the hearer is expected to interpret the speaker's meaning in an unusual way and figure out the implied meaning. This meaning is the conversational implicature. [9] In sitcoms, violation of the cooperative principles is always a great tool to generate humor.

The methodology of this research would include corpus collection and corresponding analyses. The data would be taken from *the Big Bang Theory*, a sitcom partly famous for its humor and welcomed by people from many countries. The analyses would be going on according to the violation of each maxims and submaxims. And the theory of cooperative principle and conversational implicature would be applied to explain why the specific examples of verbal humor chosen from corpus can produce humor.

## 4 Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed under the framework of cooperative principles, specifically, the violation of these principles. The humorous effect will be evaluated by the conversational implicature.

### 4.1 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Quantity

During a communication, maxim of quantity requires speaker to offer appropriate amount of information. Excessive or inadequate information would create ambiguity and sometimes produce humor.

The maxim of quantity has two submaxims, corresponding to the excessive information and inadequate information (Fig. 1).

#### **Make your contribution as informative as required.**

*Case 1 Season1 Episode 2*

*(Scene: Sheldon and Leonard help Penny carry the new furniture to her room and Sheldon was uncomfortable with the mess in Penny's room. )*

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

*Penny: (confused and resort to Leonard) What's he talking about?*

*Leonard: It's a joke.*

*Penny: I don't get it.*

*Leonard: Yeah, he didn't talk it right.*

**Fig. 1.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “make your contribution as informative as required”

Analysis: In this scene, Sheldon thinks Penny's room is too messy to live in. Although Leonard has told him that not everyone has the obsessive-compulsive disorder, Sheldon still implies Penny that he can help her tidy the room. But Penny is not familiar with Sheldon's habits, she fails to catch his meaning. So she turns to Leonard for help. Leonard knows Sheldon's true meaning but he doesn't want Penny to know that. Therefore, he refers to his words as a joke. According to the maxim of quantity, he should answer Penny's question in detail. Even if it's a joke, he should explain it further to let Penny know what's its exact meaning. The deliberate violation of the quantity maxim shows that he doesn't want Penny to understand the true meaning of Sheldon. The audiences will feel funny about the deliberate lie (Fig. 2).

#### **Don't make your contribution more informative than is required.**

*Case 2 Season 1 Episode 10*

*(Scene: One day Leonard and Sheldon are going upstairs while Penny is singing. They meet together and Penny tell them that she is chosen to participate in a showcase and ask them if they want to go to see her show. While they find an excuse and refuse the invitation. Later, Sheldon feels worried for this lie and knocks on Penny's door.)*

*Sheldon(knocking at the door): Penny? Penny? Penny?*

*Penny(open the door)*

*Sheldon: Good morning.*

*Penny: Do you have any idea what time it is?*

*Sheldon: Of course I do. My watch is linked to the atomic clock in boulder, Colorado. It's accurate to one-tenth of a second.*

**Fig. 2.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “don’t make your contribution more informative than is required”

Analysis: In this scene, we can know that the true meaning of Penny’s question is that the time is not appropriate and Sheldon has disturbed her. But Sheldon’s answer contains much information that is not necessary. And the unnecessary information makes the conversation more complex and creates humor.

#### 4.2 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality requires speaker to say something he believes to be true by avoiding saying what he believes to be false or lacks adequate evidence. If a partner is cooperative in the conversation, he will always give the true information. If not, the partner is seen as uncooperative. Sometimes, the violation of maxim of quality can also lead to humor (Fig. 3).

##### **Don’t say what you believe to be false.**

*Case 3 Season1 Episode13*

*(Scene: In a physics match,the team that solves the last question would become the winner. However, both teams keep silent and can not give the answer until a man, who works as a janitor in school, in Sheldon's team presses the button.)*

*Janitor: The answer is  $-8\pi\alpha$ .*

*(Sheldon argued with the janitor. )*

*Dr. Gablehauser: AA, I need your official answer.*

*(Sheldon denies the answer that the janitor has said several more times but he can't give an answer himself. At last he declines to provide the answer.)*

*Dr. Gablehauser: Well, that's too bad because the answer your teammate gave was correct.*

*Sheldon: That's your opinion.*

**Fig. 3.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “don’t say what you believe to be false”

Analysis: Here, when Sheldon gets the information that the answer from his teammate, who is a janitor, is correct, he can’t and doesn’t want to accept the truth. Therefore, he deceives himself and expresses his opinion that “the answer your teammate gave was correct” is just the host’s own opinion. In this way, he violates the maxim of quality and says something that he believes to be false. As a result, humor is generated (Fig. 4).

##### **Don’t say that for which you lack adequate evidence.**

*Case 4 Season 1 Episode 16**(Scene: Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, Rajesh and Penny are talking about birthday in a restaurant.)**Howard: Well, I love birthdays. Waking up to mom's special French toast breakfast, wearing the birthday king crown, playing laser tag with all my friends.**Penny: Yeah, see. That's what kids should have.**Howard: Actually, that was last year.*

**Fig. 4.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “don’t say that for which you lack adequate evidence”

Analysis: As we all know, Howard is no longer a kid. When he describes the experience of his birthday, Penny thinks it’s the experience for most kids. She doesn’t have evidence for this and this thought is just based on her own experience and knowledge. However, she takes this thought for granted and says it out. And Howard explains that what he have said was happened just in the previous year, which means it’s not what kids should have, he’s not a kid but he still has that. So Penny’s violates the maxim of quality by saying something she lacks evidence. And humor is generated by the violation.

### 4.3 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Relation

The maxim of relation means that speaker should provide information that is relevant to the topic. If the speaker says something irrelevant in context, the conversation may be interrupted. In some cases, speaker deliberately ignores the core questions or feelings of the hearer and the conversation may become hard to go on. In some other cases, people would violate this maxim to avoid awkwardness or expressing their ideas in an indirect way. Also, humor can be produced in this way (Fig. 5).

#### **Say things that are relevant.**

*Case 5 Season 1, Episode 9**(Scene: Sheldon and Leonard argued with each other and have ignored each other for several days.**Penny tried to talk with Sheldon and ease tensions between the two boys.)**Penny: No, I'm just asking if it's difficult to be fighting with your best friend?**Sheldon: Oh, I hadn't thought about it like that. I wonder if I've been experiencing physiological manifestations of some sort of unconscious emotional turmoil.**Penny: Wait. What?**Sheldon: I couldn't poop this morning.**Penny: Just talk to him. I'm sure you guys can work this out.**Sheldon: It's certainly preferable to my plan.**Penny: Which was?**Sheldon: A powerful laxative.*

**Fig. 5.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “say things that are relevant”

Analysis: In this case, Penny is trying hard to talk with Sheldon about the trouble between Leonard and him. But Sheldon firstly uses some professional and obscure expression towards Penny’s question. Then, he constantly says something irrelevant, which finally leads to the end of their conversation. There is no doubt that Sheldon deliberately violates the maxim of relation. And the seemingly irrelevant content of the conversation produces humor successfully.

#### 4.4 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Manner

As for the maxim of manner, the speaker should make his utterance in a brief, clear and orderly way. In one word, the speaker should be perspicuous. This maxim emphasized the way of talking but not the content of a conversation. If someone violates the maxim, it means some obscure words or ambiguity appear in a conversation. Sometimes the violation of maxim of manner can give rise to humor and arouse people's attraction (Fig. 6).

##### **Avoid obscurity of expression.**

*Case 6 Season 1 Episode 5*

*(Scene: Sheldon is doing his research about eggs at home. Penny knocks the door and comes in.)*

*Penny: Hey, hi, I'm running out to the supermarket. Do you guys need anything?*

*Sheldon: Oh, this would be one of those circumstances that people unfamiliar with the law of large numbers would call a coincidence.*

*Penny: I'm sorry?*

*Sheldon: I need eggs. Four dozen should suffice.*

*Penny: Four dozen?*

*Sheldon: Yes, even distributed among brown, white, free-range, large, extra large and jumbo.*

*Penny: Okay, one more time.*

*Sheldon: Never mind. You won't get it right. I'd better come with you.*

**Fig. 6.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “avoid obscurity of expression”

Analysis: In this scene, we can learn that Sheldon needs many eggs to do his research. And by chance, Penny plans to go to the supermarket. When Penny asks if they need something from the supermarket, Sheldon tells her his need in a very professional and unexpected way. The complicated answer cannot be understood by Penny. Besides, usually this kind of complicated answer would not come up in daily conversation. In one word, Sheldon violated the maxim of manner by saying something obscured. Naturally, humor is produced (Fig. 7).

##### **Avoid ambiguity.**

*Case 7 Season 1 Episode 17*

*(Scene: Sheldon is learning Chinese on his headphones on his way downstairs to get the newspaper while Penny comes in, and they have a conversation.)*

*Penny: Sheldon?*

*Sheldon: A yah! Xia-si-wo-je!*

*Penny: I'm sorry. Look, do you have a second?*

*Sheldon: A second what, pair of underwear?*

*Penny: I was just wondering if I could talk to you.*

**Fig. 7.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating “avoid ambiguity”

Analysis: In this dialogue, Penny wants to have a chat with Sheldon but she notices that Sheldon is wearing a headphone. Therefore, she asks him “do you have a second?” This sentence contains the pragmatic ambiguity. It can be interpreted in several ways. Penny wants to convey the meaning that if you have time to talk to me about something. While Sheldon thinks that she is asking if he has one more something. Obviously, Penny has violated the maxim of manner. The ambiguity produces humor in this conversation (Fig. 8).

##### **Be brief.**

*Case 8 Season 1 Episode 17*

*(Scene: Penny has just broken up with a boy because she finds that he is a real bastard. Leonard goes to comfort Penny but Penny doesn't want to listen to that and just lets him go away. Leonard then goes back to his room.)*

*Leonard: She doesn't want to talk.*

*Sheldon: Not surprising. Penny's emotional response is originated in the primitive portion of the brain, known as the amygdala, while speech is centered in the much more recently developed neo-cortex. The former can easily overpower the latter. Giving scientific credence to the notion of being "rendered speechless".*

*(Leonard watched him with a speechless expression.)*

*Sheldon: Or maybe she just doesn't want to talk.*

**Fig. 8.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating the maxim of "be brief"

**Analysis:** In the scene above, Sheldon says a long sentence with very professional and complicated words and concepts. The core meaning is just the short sentence that Leonard has said: Penny doesn't want to talk. After seeing the speechless expression of Leonard, Sheldon realizes that he has complicated the sentence and made people confused. By violating the maxim of manner, Sheldon does not say things in a brief way and get a humorous effect (Fig. 9).

### **Be orderly.**

*Case 9 Season 1 Episode 17*

*(Scene: Sheldon, Leonard, Howard and Rajesh sit together in their room, chatting and playing games.)*

*Rajesh: Let's talk again about how you screwed up and got Penny back together with her old boyfriend.*

*Leonard: Just roll the dice.*

*(Rajesh rolls the dice and go on the chess game. He is reading the content of the outcome decided by his dice.)*

*Rajesh: "enslaved by warlocks. Stay here until you roll two, four or six..."*

*Leonard: She was mad at him! She was done with him! The relationship was broken beyond repair. And I walked over there, and I fixed it.*

**Fig. 9.** The example that shows how humor is produced by violating the maxim of "be orderly"

**Analysis:** In this conversation, Rajesh wants to talk with Leonard about the relationship between Penny and Leonard at first, but Leonard refuses to mention it and asks Rajesh to go on playing the chess game. Then, Rajesh just does as Leonard has asked him, rolls the dice and reads the content of the outcome decided by his dice. Suddenly, Leonard shouts "Penny was mad at him!" He turns the topic back to the relationship between Penny and him. His words are not orderly and violate the maxim of manner. And it is this self-contradiction that generates humor. Also, Leonard also generates humor by violating the maxim of relation by saying something irrelevant to the current topic.

## **5 Conclusion**

From the analysis of *The Big Bang Theory (Season 1)* above, we can draw some conclusions.

Firstly, it confirms that it is feasible to produce verbal humor by pragmatic approaches in sitcoms. This paper analyzes humorous language from the perspective of pragmatic, the cooperation principle. The whole analysis is presented in detail, from which we can learn that many humorous language is generated by using the method of deliberately violating the cooperative principle.

Secondly, the violation of the cooperative principle can give rise to humor by producing conversation implicature, which may lead to the misunderstanding of the hearer and



let him give an unexpected response. Sometimes the violation is deliberate and sometimes it's unconscious, the more tactfully the violation is, the more vivid the humorous effect can be.

Thirdly, after analyzing the causes of humor, we can better understand and master language, and thus improve our ability to appreciate and use language. We can see that it's not difficult to produce humor in this sitcom. But it's worth mentioning that the relationship between the characters is very close. They are very good friends. So some of the violation of the maxims should be use carefully in some situations, which means that when it comes to sense of humor, the actual application and effectiveness should be carefully evaluated. We should pay attention to the relationship between others and us, the situation that we are in, the whole atmosphere, etc. On some formal occasions, it's better to obey the cooperative principle.

Besides, the paper has some limitations. Some verbal humor in the sitcom may cannot be comprehended by the author because of the lack of intercultural knowledge. And some other theories of the pragmatic deviation of verbal are not analyzed in this paper, such as politeness principle, cognitive pragmatics. So the thorough study can be more further.

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