

The Verbal Humor in Friends Based on the Violation of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract: Humor is thought to be an important cultural phenomenon and catches people's increasing attention in recent years. Sitcoms are particularly popular for its verbal humor and the violation of Cooperative Principle is especially common and crucial to create humor for sitcoms. Thus, this article chooses the American sitcom Friends as the research object to analyze its verbal humor of the script based on the violation of Cooperative Principle. Through the violation of the Maxim of Quantity, the Maxim of Quality, the Maxim of Relation and the Maxim of Manner, humorous effects are created, and the audience are amused. Many characters in Friends intentionally break the Maxim of Quantity by providing more or less information in order to create hilarious effects. Additionally, speakers frequently violate the Maxim of Quality by telling a lie in order to make jokes, as seen in Chandler's embarrassed reaction. As for the violation of the Maxim of Relation, people in Friends purposefully say something unrelated to the subject, and laughter bursts out when the audience realizes the real implications behind the words. Finally, there are numerous unclear and verbose sentences with amusing consequences regarding the breach of the Maxim of Manner, which the audience might appreciate and chuckle after hearing.

Keywords: verbal humor, Cooperative Principle, sitcoms

1. Introduction

As globalization accelerates, cultural exchanges among different countries are frequently on the rise when international communication and cooperation in economic, political, and other areas are becoming more prevailing. Therefore, people attach more importance to cultural research. Humor is one of the most significant aspects of life and is thought to be a pervasive cultural phenomenon. It induces laughter and brings relaxation and comfort to people, which eases unpleasant situations and serves as a spice of improving the atmosphere and strengthening interpersonal relationships. According to Cai Hui and Yin Xing, the primary notion of humor dates back to the time of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece and has been regularly refined and developed throughout the years. Humor is an age-old topic [1].

Sitcom, short for situation comedy, originates from the United States and is beloved by people around the world for its humor. In *Sitcom* wrote by Richard Hornby, situation comedies are both new and old. Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* and Beatrice-Benedick's *Much Ado about Nothing* are the earliest sitcoms. Moreover, New Comedy enjoyed a wide popularity among families. Since

then, “situation comedy” has been influenced. Therefore, a sitcom not only is just a genre of television performance but also constitute all the domestic comedies in any medium with characters and plots [2]. *Friends* is one of the representatives of popular America sitcoms. This year is the 25th year of the premiere of *Friends*, which has raised great waves of watching and recapturing the happiness of it again. *Friends* is translated in various languages and has gained popularity among global audience. Therefore, studying its verbal humor is beneficial for film and television research.

There are two methods to create humor in sitcoms. As Liu Xiaojing points out, the expressive forms of sitcom, whether it is domestic or foreign, can be loosely divided into two categories: language and posture, which can also be categorized as verbal communication and nonverbal communication [3]. As for the verbal communication, there are various methods being used in films and television series such as exaggeration, dialects and so on to provide a humorous atmosphere [4]. What’s more, some of the humorous effects are produced by the speaker’s implications behind the words, which can be interpreted from the perspective of linguistics. Scholars have studied humor from different perspectives such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, linguistics and so on. In recent years, study on pragmatics of humor has been a major research perspective.

In view of the current research situation, this article aims to analyze the script of the fifth season of *Friends* from the perspective of violating the Cooperative Principle proposed by H.P.Grice. Researchers have found that speakers can gain additional language effects when violating the Cooperative Principle, such as humor [5], euphemism [6], and attracting attention. In *An Introduction to Linguistics*, sensible conversational partners are supposed to be cooperative and helpful to each other in communication and their words should be correctly understood in the given context [7]. However, many characters in sitcoms deliberately violate the Cooperative Principle in order to create humorous effects. In the past, many scholars have applied different theories such as the Relevance Principle [8] and Politeness Principle [9] to study sitcoms. Therefore, this article is dedicated to elaborating the verbal humor of *Friends* from the view of violating the Cooperative Principle.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This article aims to analyze the verbal humor in *Friends* from the viewpoint of the Cooperative Principle. In 1967, Herbert Paul Grice, a famous American philosopher of language, delivered a speech at Harvard University. He stated that in people’s communication process, participants in the conversation seem to be consciously or unconsciously following a certain principle in order to cooperate effectively and achieve some communication purposes, which is called the Cooperative Principle (CP for short).

In *Logic and Conversation* [10], an essay H.P.Grice wrote in 1975, he elaborated on four categories of the Cooperative Principle that people adhere to in conversations, each of which includes a criterion and some sub criteria. The four maxims are the Maxim of Quantity, the Maxim of Quality, the Maxim of Relation and the Maxim of Manner.

Firstly, the category of Quantity is related to the quantity of information to be provided, which requires the speaker’s contribution to be informative enough but not of exceeding amount. The latter requirement may be disputable because too much information is just a waste of time without infringing the CP. However, over-information may be confusing so that it is liable to mislead the listener and break the the Maxim of Relation, which greatly reduces the efficiency of communication. Secondly, the Maxim of Quality imposes some restrictions on the authenticity of the conversation content. Speakers are not supposed to say something that they believe is false or something that lacks sufficient evidence. If the Maxim of Quality is violated, listeners in the dialogue are not able to obtain the true information, which is detrimental to both sides. Thirdly, Grice placed one single requirement that is “to be relevant” under the Maxim of Relation. Although this maxim is brief, any violation of it may bring a great number of implications. For example, in response to some requests, replying

something irrelevant symbolizes polite refusal. Finally, as to the Maxim of Manner, the core of this maxim is to “be perspicuous”. Grice proposed some sub criteria such as avoiding obscurity, ambiguity, unnecessary prolixity and trying to be orderly. Nevertheless, he thought the observance of this maxim may be less urgent than the others. It is possible that a person who speaks with excessive words would receive softer criticism than someone who has uttered something he believes to be incorrect. Therefore, it is noticeable that these four maxims have roughly covered the principles people observe intentionally or unintentionally in daily conversations.

If flouting any maxim by either side, implicature or humor will arise. When one party in communication takes the initiative to violate any of the four maxims, if the listener can understand his implications behind the violation of maxims, both of them are still cooperative, which is advantageous to the formation of humor.

3. The Analysis of *Friends* Based on the Violation of Cooperative Principle

This section is going to analyze some specific examples which form humor by violating the Cooperative Principle in the script of the fifth season of *Friends*.

3.1. Humor Created by Violating the Maxim of Quantity

According to Grice, speakers should make their contribution as informative as required but not more informative than required, which is the basic requirement of the Maxim of Quantity [10]. However, in American sitcoms, many characters may intentionally violate the Maxim of Quantity to produce some humorous effects. It can be achieved by supplying more or less information. The following examples in *Friends* can prove this.

(1) Ross: Oh, so-so you talked to her. Did she, did she sound mad?

Monica: No, but she likes me. You abandoned her on a plane to Greece. (Episode Two, Season Five)

In this episode, Ross left Rachel alone on a plane to Greece and when Rachel came back, he asked Monica whether Rachel was mad or not. Monica said, “No, but she likes me.” This sentence provided more messages than Ross required, which deliberately infringed the Maxim of Quantity. In fact, Monica suggested that Rachel was not mad when talking to her but was dissatisfied with Ross because he abandoned Rachel in the airport without explanation. According to Ross’s expression after hearing Monica’s answer, it is evident that both sides of the conversation have gained the implicit meaning of the conversation. Therefore, this seemingly redundant sentence created a significant humorous effect through the violation of the Maxim of Quantity.

(2) Rachel: What ‘cha readin’?

Ross: The paper. (Episode Two, Season Five)

Ross was frustrated by the repeated rejection of his wife because he said the wrong name in their wedding before. In this scene, Rachel and Ross were in the Central Perk drinking coffee. Rachel wanted to confess her love for Ross and she saw Ross reading the newspaper. She started the conversation by “What ‘cha readin’?” and expected Ross to communicate with her. Nevertheless, Ross was still in bad mood and reluctant to interact with Rachel, causing that he replied with the most obvious answer, which was unnecessary and not informative enough. Ross’s answer infringed the Maxim of Quantity on purpose, which not only reinforced his miserable image but also added comedic effects to the audience.

3.2. Humor Created by Violating the Maxim of Quality

The Maxim of Quality requires people not to say anything that they believe is false or that lacks adequate evidence [10]. In *Friends*, speakers frequently violate the Maxim of Quality by lying to achieve humorous effects.

(3) Frank: Chandler's a girl!

Chandler: Oh God, kindergarten flashback.

Frank: They must read the sonogram wrong. 'Cause they, 'cause they thought it was a boy, but Chandler's a girl! Chandler's a girl!

Chandler: Okay, keep saying it! (Episode Three, Season Five)

Phoebe was giving birth at hospital. The father of the children Frank planned to name his third kid "Chandler", who was thought to be a boy by mistake but turned out to be a girl in the end. The baby girl's name was the same with Chandler Bing. When Frank's youngest daughter was born, he excitedly rushed out of the delivery room and shouted to a group of friends guarding outside the door that his kid Chandler is a girl. Surprisingly, instead of stopping Frank from saying, Chandler told him to keep talking. Obviously, Chandler did not tell the truth, which violated the Maxim of Quality. Chandler was actually implying that Frank's voice was too loud, which would cause unnecessary damage to his image. He was conveying an implicit message to Frank, "Do not speak so loudly, you're embarrassing me." Chandler's implication conveyed by violating the Maxim of Quality with his embarrassed expression created a hilarious humor effect.

(4) Chandler: Ross is wearing leather pants! Does nobody else see that Ross is wearing leather pants? Someone comments on the pants!

Rachel: I think they're very nice.

Monica: I like 'em.

Joey: Yeah!

Monica: I like them a lot.

Chandler: That's not what I had in mind! See, people like Ross don't generally wear these types of pants. You see, they're very tight. Maybe there's something in that area.

Ross: Oh see, I-I needed a new thing for today and there's this leather store that always smells so good.

Chandler: Oh, come on!!

Ross: Okay, seriously, what do you think?

Joey: You look like a freak. (Episode Eleven, Season Five)

Chandler's New Year resolution was not to make fun of his friends so he had to endure the thought of mocking others. In this scene, Chandler saw Ross wearing new leather pants and wanted to make fun of him but he was not allowed to mock, so he expected the other friends to comment on his pants. However, the others intended to tease Chandler so they refused to laugh at Ross's leather pants and lied that they were great. They did not reveal the truth until Chandler left. Apparently, they flouted the Maxim of Quality on purpose, which was beneficial to achieve humorous effects when they saw Chandler's reaction.

3.3. Humor Created by Violating the Maxim of Relation

The Maxim of Relation expects that the content involved in the dialogue should be relevant to the topic [10]. In other words, speakers are not supposed to say anything unrelated to the subject in their conversation. However, frequent phenomena of people violating the Maxim of Relation in sitcoms can be easily noticed in order to amuse audience. The examples in *Friends* are as follows.

(5) Ross: Actually, do you guys' mind staying here for a while?

Monica: Ugh, y'know, umm we gotta get up early and catch that plane for New York.

Chandler: Yeah, it's a very large plane. (Episode One, Season Five)

In this conversation, Ross asked Monica and Chandler to stay with him for some time while they did not want to do so. Instead of refusing Ross directly, Monica made an excuse that they had to take a plane early next morning. The information apparently had nothing to do with Ross's request, which was an intentional violation of the Maxim of Relation, and implied their reluctance to stay. Moreover, Chandler's supplementary description of the plane enhanced the humorous effects.

(6) Monica: What is the matter with you?! Do you want to fall into the trap? Do you want to fall into the trap?!

Rachel: Ohh! You did not drop any socks! (Episode Two, Season Five)

In this scene, Monica told a lie that she dropped some socks in the hallway and asked Rachel for help so that she could have a private conversation with Rachel outside the room. When Rachel came out, Monica's real purpose was actually to persuade Rachel not to accompany Ross. However, Rachel was unwilling to leave Ross alone at that time, so she tried to change the subject. Monica was talking about Rachel's action while Rachel's answer was irrelevant to Monica's words, which clearly violated the Maxim of Relation. In addition, Rachel's words also revealed her innocence and generated the humorous effects.

3.4. Humor Created by Violating the Maxim of Manner

The Maxim of Manner means that the speaker should express in a clear and perspicuous way as well as avoiding obscurity, ambiguity and prolixity [10]. Hence, obscure and wordy expressions are always thought to be a violation of the Maxim of Manner. In Friends, there are numerous sentences that are so ambiguous or verbose that the audience enjoy and laugh after hearing.

(7) Monica: Umm, actually I was about to tell you that I was, I was going to get out of it, but hey, if we're just goofing around then uh, maybe I will go out with him.

Chandler: Fine! Maybe I will too! (Episode Three, Season Five)

In this episode, Monica and Chandler were in the hospital to accompany Phoebe. Monica and Rachel saw two handsome doctors and planned to hang out with them. Nevertheless, Monica was secretly in a relationship with Chandler. In fact, Chandler did not want her to go on a date with others but he was afraid to speak out because he was not sure about Monica's attitude towards their relationship. When Monica said she would go out with that doctor, Chandler said angrily that maybe he would too. This sentence is obscure and can be interpreted in two ways. The first interpretation is that Chandler will go on a date just as Monica do; the second explanation is that Chandler will also go on a date with the doctor who is going to date with Monica. Chandler's ambiguous words violate the Maxim of Manner and become the punchline in this conversation, which is hilarious to the audience.

(8) Rachel: Okay, Phoebe, honey, you gotta be kidding. I mean, you know you cannot keep one of these babies!

Phoebe: Why not?! Maybe I can, you don't know!

Rachel: Yes! Yes! Yes, I do! I do know! Frank and Alice are gonna want to keep all of their children!

Phoebe: Maybe not! Y'know? Seriously, three babies are a handful maybe they're y'know, looking for a chance to unload one of them. Listen, I-I hate to miss an opportunity just because I didn't ask! Y'know? (Episode Three, Season Five)

Phoebe intended to keep one of her brother's babies for herself but was embarrassed to ask for that. Therefore, she decided to persuade Rachel to ask her brother for a kid. In this conversation, both of them talked a lot and repeated some words, which made their expressions wordy and prolix. Their words noticeably violated the Maxim of Manner and reflected their real feelings at that moment. Rachel repeated "yes" three times, which showed that she was nervous after hearing Phoebe's request

and she thought Phoebe was crazy. In addition, Phoebe's recurrent "y'know" also revealed her anxiety. By violating the Maxim of Manner, their panic can be felt by the audience, which enhanced the effect of humor.

4. Conclusion

This article intends to explore the analysis of humor from the perspective of pragmatics; thus, the author takes the American sitcom *Friends* as the research object, trying to analyze the dialogues from the view of violating the Cooperative Principle, which is beneficial for film and television research. The Cooperative Principle is proposed by Herbert Paul Grice. He stated that throughout conversations, people abide by certain rules either consciously or unconsciously in order to cooperate well and achieve certain communication goals. Grice categorized the principle into four maxims: the Maxim of Quantity, the Maxim of Quality, the Maxim of Relation and the Maxim of Manner.

The article analyzes the script of *Friends* based on four maxims respectively. In *Friends*, many characters intentionally violate the Maxim of Quantity by supplying more or less information to produce humorous effects. Moreover, speakers frequently violate the Maxim of Quality by lying to create humor such as the reaction of Chandler when he felt embarrassed. In addition, as for the violation of the Maxim of Relation, speakers in *Friends* deliberately said something irrelevant to the topic and humor arises when the audience understand their implications behind the words. Finally, in regard to the violation of the Maxim of Manner, there are many ambiguous and verbose sentences with humorous effects that the audience can enjoy and laugh after hearing.

Nevertheless, verbal humor has always been a complicated topic studied for years. There are still some limitations of this article. Firstly, this article only analyzes the script of *Friends* without consideration of other sitcoms, which is not comprehensive enough to study the verbal humor. Secondly, all the fragments from the sitcom *Friends* are collected by the author with subjective preferences. Thus, the analysis of discourse lacks objectiveness. Thirdly, verbal humor in this article is analyzed based on Grice's Cooperative Principle paying no regard to other factors which are influential in the formation of humor such as the body language and the facial expressions of the characters. Therefore, the author hopes that future research is able to analyze verbal humor from multiple perspectives with several research objects, which is advantageous to deepen people's understanding of verbal humor and sitcoms.

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