

A Study of Verbal Humor in *Two Broke Girls* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

Guizhi Zhang*, Humei Ren

Henan University of Technology, Zhengzhou City, Henan, China

* Corresponding Author.

Abstract: As an important social phenomenon in human society, humor exists in every aspect of daily life. A sitcom, as one of the television programs, is an important carrier of humor, especially discourse humor. Humor not only promotes people's daily communication and brings joy to people, but also attracts the attention of the researchers from all fields all over the world. In recent years, many researchers have made in-depth research on English sitcoms from sociology, ethics, literature, art, film and television, music, translation, and other fields. However, there is little research to analyze it from the perspective of linguistics. It is of great significance to study English sitcoms from the perspective of linguistics. Based on the pragmatic Cooperative Principle (CP), this paper probes into the verbal humor strategies in the dialogues of the American sitcom *Two Broke Girls*. The findings show that: 1) Cooperative Principle provides a new perspective for the generation and interpretation mechanism of discourse humor; 2) Cooperative Principle plays a positive role in promoting daily communication, English learning and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Cooperative Principle; Humor; Sitcom

1. Introduction

1.1 The Background of this Study

Sitcom is a kind of light comedy. As a TV play formation, sitcom format was born in the 1920s on BBC radio in the United Kingdom with its initial broadcast of *Sam and Henry*. Its comedy is mainly reflected in the situation dialogue, with humorous language to touch people. The topic of sitcom must be related to the life of the public, but also the public

concern. It is highly studied by English learners in China. A large number of humorous words in the sitcoms provide a relaxed, rich, and real language environment for English learners, which well stimulates learners' interest in learning. It is an effective way for students to understand American language, culture and living habits, which helps to cultivate language learners' cross-cultural awareness.

The word "Humor" comes from the word "umor" in Latin, meaning "humoral", which is a kind of wisdom that can arouse emotion in human psychology, and some kind of processing or destruction of reality after proper regulation of logic. Chaplin once said that humor is the highest manifestation of wisdom. As a kind of language art, verbal humor is the embodiment of pragmatic skills. It is the viewpoint or opinion expressed by people in concise, vivid, humorous, exaggerated and ironic language forms according to their deep understanding of real life [1].

The production of humor is not only the internal factors of the language itself, but also the use of the language in the context. For a long time, Western scholars have studied the meaning and function of humor from the fields of psychology, cognition, linguistics and sociology. There are many kinds of American humor, including dry humor, advanced word humor, intelligent humor, good-natured irony, scale jokes (paragraphs that can be used as small jokes) and black humor [2].

There are three main definitions for humor: (1) a funny or amusing quality; jokes, funny stories, etc., of a particular kind; (2) the ability to be funny or to be amused by things that are funny; (3) the way someone feels emotionally [3]. It can be seen that humor has multiple meanings, referring to funny traits, jokes, and stories, which could effectively describe people's emotions. Humor is an important

form in verbal communication, and some specific pragmatic functions can be achieved through humor, such as saving face, breaking the deadlock, avoiding embarrassment, and changing the communication atmosphere.

1.2 Introduction to *Two Broke Girls*

Two Broke Girls is an American sitcom that premiered on CBS in 2011. After the premiere, the ratings continued to rise, won the public praise and the art direction award at the 2012 Emmy Awards. It sets in a fast-food restaurant in Brooklyn, New York, which tells the story of two urban girls, Caroline and Max as waiters, with completely different identities and backgrounds. Caroline's family is down, and Max's fate is bumpy. They become good friends because they have the same personality, who tend to raise funds to create a new career together. The humorous dialogues in the sitcom often make audiences laugh.

1.3 The Purpose of this Study

Different countries have various cultures, which block the cross-cultural communication. Having a thorough knowledge about different cultures is necessary for a successful cross-culture communication. Being one of the culture phenomena, humor plays a key role in daily communication.

With the Cooperation Principle (CP) as the theoretical framework and the humorous dialogue in *Two Broke Girls* as the corpus, this paper analyzes the humorous discourse effect caused by the violation of the CP, aiming to improve readers' understanding of humor in American sitcoms and English communication ability. Specifically, this paper attempts to solve the following problems: 1) How is the humorous effect achieved by flouting or observing the CP in *Two Broke Girls*? 2) What are effects of violation of the maxims of the CP for the study of verbal humor?

2. Literature Review

Humor is a common topic in almost every field, so it is difficult to give an exact definition of this word. It is the activity of human's brains, the emotion inside human beings; it is even the smile appeared on our faces. As a result, if we want to have a more precise definition of humor, we'd better to discuss humor definition from various

perspectives.

2.1 Previous Studies of Humor in China

Humor studies in China have made great progress. Wang Guowei was the first one to introduce the English word, humor, into Chinese. He translated humor into Oumuya. Lin Yutang translated humor into Youmo, which was the first time the word Youmo appeared in Chinese form [4]. Handan Chun is a person in Wei dynasty, he wrote *Funny Stories* with three chapters, which is considered as the earliest work of jokes. Famous scholars like Lu Xun, Lao She and Qian Zhongshu were great representative features of that time, they used humor as a powerful arm and pushed humor to the highest climax ever since [5].

2.2 Previous Studies of Humor in Foreign Countries

Humor studies in foreign countries have also made great progress. The American philosopher Saul Steinberg had even said: "trying to define humor is also a definition of humor" [6]. Humor is an immortal topic, just like love, time, and universe [7]. Since ancient time, people from all over the world have tried to define this abstract word, and Palmer had ever said: "nothing is indeed humorous, we can only learn what is humor in the recognizing process". The Germany writer Jean Paul and the French philosopher Bergson held that there was also another wide range of definition of humor, which deems that humor is of the same grade with intelligent, comedy, joke, etc. It seems that humor and laughter are two sides of a coin [8].

Compared to humor studies in foreign countries, most studies still stay at the basic stage of analyzing words and humor forming techniques in China. Some theories haven't been used in humor studies, such as the theories in modern psychology and linguistics. The following section introduces the theory used in this paper.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1 Cooperative Principle

Cooperative Principle (CP) was first put forward in American by language philosopher H. P. Grice in 1967. Grice points out that in

everyday conversation, our intercourse conversation is not usually made up of a string of unrelated utterances, or it would not make sense. In order to make a conversation go smoothly, both interlocutors must agree with each other and follow certain principles [9]. In a real conversation, both interlocutors have a common goal or direction to make the conversation meaningful and could be understood mutually. Specifically, CP means making your conversational contribution as required at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.

3.2 The Maxims of Conversation

Grice classified nine maxims of conversation into four categories in CP: Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner. The names of the four categories are taken from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant [10]. CP and its component maxims ensure that in an exchange of conversation, the right amount of information is provided, and that interaction is conducted in a truthful, relevant and perspicuous manner.

The first three maxims emphasize what is said, while the maxim of manner emphasizes how it is said. Specifically, 1) the maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true: (i) Do not say what you believe to be false; (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. 2) the maxim of Quantity: (i) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange); (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. 3) the maxim of Relation: Be relevant. 4) the maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous: (i) Avoid obscurity of expression; (ii) Avoid ambiguity; (iii) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); (iv) Be orderly.

Grice believes that the two sides of the conversation must follow these principles in order to cooperate well, and the communication can be reasonable and smooth. However, this is not always the case in real life conversations, and people often violate these guidelines intentionally or unintentionally. If one party violates this principle, the communicative effect will inevitably be affected, which will lead to the inconsistency between the speaker's subjective expression and the objective effect, which is an important

reason for the production of humor.

4. Findings and Discussions in this Study

Findings and discussions in relation to humor studies are shown from aspects of violating four maxims of conversation based on Cooperative Principle (CP) in the following section.

4.1 Humor from Violating the Maxim of Quantity

There are two main ways in which people violate the quantity criterion in conversation. One is that the parties of the communication do not provide sufficient information; second, the information provided by the two parties or one party exceeds the amount of information needed for communication. For example, Caroline: Maybe you're having a hard time imagining this cupcake business could ever even happen because nobody ever believes in you or your dream. I can make this happen, Max. For me, for you, for us. Just keep making those amazing cupcakes. And I'll do the rest till you believe.

Max: I believe everything you just said and that children are the future.

Caroline and Max are talking in the kitchen, and Caroline tries to persuade Max opening a bakery with her. She said a lot of words of comfort and encouragement to hope Max believes her. In fact, Max doesn't have to say so much to show her trust for Caroline, even added to "the child's future". This is the special case that people say more information in conversation than they need to communicate. However, Max is just saying that because she doesn't trust Caroline at all, and the answer artfully displayed her "sharp tongue" side and made humorous effect.

4.2 Humor from Violating the Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality requires speakers not to say what they believe to be false or lacking sufficient evidence. To create a humorous effect, sometimes speaker will use exaggerated or ironic rhetorical devices to deliberately say something that is not consistent with the facts to violate the quality criteria. For example, Han: I just opened this email, and my mother is coming to visit.

Max: You have a mother? I thought you came

to life after a kid in a toy store made a wish. The short and compact Han is often teased by Max and Caroline, so in this dialogue, when Han tells Max and Caroline that his mother is coming to visit him, Max's reply is "You have a mother? I thought you came to life after a kid in a toy store made a wish." Here, Max knows that her words are false, but she will do so. It's a violation of the quality rules of CP, which makes audience laugh.

Han: I was not talking hot. I was apologizing. She's still angry I left home.

Max: What do you even have to apologize for? You must have been the easiest birth ever. She could have coughed you into a catcher's mitt.

After Han, a short fast-food restaurant owner, calls his mother in Korean, Han tells Max that he is apologizing to his mother: "She's still angry I left home." But Max says: What do you even have to apologize for? You must have been the easiest birth ever. She could have coughed you into a catcher's mitt." Apparently, even if Han was short, his mother could not have coughed him out. Max exaggerates Han's birth, violating quality standards, but the audience gets humor in it.

4.3 Humor from Violating the Maxim of Relation

Sometimes the speaker will follow the other party's words skillfully with "intentional" misunderstanding, violating the relation rules, making the conversation ambiguous, producing funny and humorous effects. For example,

Caroline: Attention, everyone. Max and I have a little late-night treat for you.

Max: Don't say it all excited like that. Now when it's not drugs, Earl's going to be pissed.

Caroline happily arrives at the restaurant with the cake Max has just made to make everyone have a taste. However, Max said: "Don't say it all excited like that. Now when it's not drugs, Earl's going to be pissed". Because Earl was a drug addict decades ago. Obviously, Max knows that Caroline has cake on her plate, but Max still takes every opportunity to tease Earl, which made hilarious effect.

4.4 Humor from Violating the Maxim of Manner

The violation of the principle of manner means that the speaker beats around the bush to cause

words ambiguity, so that humor is produced in this process. For example,

Max: Oleg, how do you feel about cats?

Oleg: Loved it. Saw it nine times on Broadway. Very clever show, but a little expensive. The most I've ever paid to see a puppy dance.

In this conversation, Max asks Oleg if he likes cats. And Oleg says he loves "cats" (a kind of music drama) and he has seen them on Broadway nine times. This way of answering the unasked question makes it clear that Oleg is not interested in keeping a cat, and at the same time, he creates a good humorous effect of conversation.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Research Summary

Humor is a complicated and interesting research object, which attracts numerous scholars to make research on it from various aspects. Sitcom is an ideal kind of learning resource for English lovers, as it truly reflects the language habits and lifestyle of Westerners through humorous language, which helps to improve the interest of English learners.

This paper aims at analyzing how the humorous effect generates under the guidance of Cooperative Principle (CP) with American sitcom *Two Broke Girls* as database. This paper analyzes the English humor produced by the violation of CP and finds that: 1) Cooperative Principle provides a new perspective for the generation and interpretation mechanism of discourse humor; 2) Cooperative Principle plays a positive role in promoting daily communication, English learning and cross-cultural communication. An understanding of English humor can help English learners better understand and appreciate the charm and cultural connotation of the language, further enhance reader's cross-cultural awareness, and more effectively understand and use the language in practical communication.

5.2 Limitations and Suggestions

At last, as the limitations of time and energy, this research may develop its analysis in a shallow degree, so some subjective viewpoints may appear in it. Further studies will be carried on in future. This paper studies the humor generation system under the guidance

of CP, which has only used one theory, which cannot emerge an overall analysis. A more sophisticated study could be done with the help of other theories in future.

Besides, the keypoint of this study is the verbal humor in sitcom, but we cannot deny that humor is a big subject of various kinds, body gesture, expressions, and cultural differences can all emerge humorous effect, but this study is too short and shallow to give a more reasonable explanation. These are some weaknesses of this study which are needed to be supplied.

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