

An Analysis of Verbal Humor from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle—A Case Study of *Young Sheldon*

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Abstract: Humor is a panacea for life, which can help people face difficulties and facts of life pleasantly. With the development of pragmatics and the popularization of interdisciplinary research, there has been an increasing tendency in integrating verbal humor with pragmatics. From the perspective of Cooperative Principle, this paper studies and dissects the generation mechanism of verbal humor. Taking the American sitcom *Young Sheldon* as a case study, this paper analyzes the dialogues of *Young Sheldon* by means of the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle: quantity, quality, relation, and manner; and discusses the reason why characters violate the Cooperative Principle and the way how characters achieve verbal humor by violating the Cooperative Principle. This research can let English learners better understand the generation mechanism of verbal humor, so as to better appreciate verbal humor.

Keywords: Verbal Humor; Cooperative Principle; *Young Sheldon*

1. Introduction

As a language art, humor is an essential skill in everyday life and social interaction. A humorous conversation can not only attracts the attention of the hearer, but also contributes to establish an intimate relationship. In recent years, researchers have tried to explain verbal humor from various aspects such as psychology and sociology, trying to explore the generation mechanism of humor. With the development of pragmatics, many scholars have used the Cooperative Principle to explain the generation of verbal humor. Taking *Young Sheldon* as a case study, this paper adopts the Cooperative Principle to explore the generation of verbal humor.

As a spin-off of *The Big Bang Theory*, *Young Sheldon* tells the story of a 9-year-old prodigy Sheldon Cooper and his family living in Texas. *Young Sheldon* is a TV series full of humor, American culture, family conflicts and love, suitable for learners of all levels to learn English. A large number of humorous dialogues in the show provide rich materials for this research. Therefore, this paper selects specific examples in *Young Sheldon* to analyze the generation of verbal humor.

Although many scholars have conducted extensive pragmatic research on verbal humor in sitcoms, the underlying reasons for the violation of the Cooperative Principle by characters are rarely discussed. Therefore, this paper selects materials from *Young Sheldon* to analyze the generation mechanism of verbal humor. This research can allow English learners to better understand the deep structure of humor and its generation mechanism, so as to better appreciate humor.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Verbal Humor

In Oxford Dictionary, humor means an interesting or comical quality, especially expressed in speech and the ability to perceive, express and appreciate humor. In the early time of the 20th century, a renowned scholar Lin Yutang is the first to interpret “humor” as “幽默”. He defined humor as a kind of psychological emotion that arouses human wisdom, and it is a reconstruction after breaking the logical reality.

In a word, various explanation of humor have been given by scholars and many authoritative dictionaries. However, no general agreement on a standard definition of humor has been reached. In

recent years, the linguistic research on humor at home and abroad has basically adopted a broad definition of humor. In the light of the correlation between humor and language, there are two types of humor, namely, verbal humor and non-verbal humor, and verbal humor is what the author studies in the paper.

Therefore, this paper tentatively defines verbal humor as “humor that is expressed in speech other than in the forms of writing or action.”

2.2 Previous Studies on Verbal Humor Abroad

Western researchers have systematically studied verbal humor from different viewpoints. There are three classic theories in modern studies of humor, namely, Incongruity Theory, Release Theory, and Superiority Theory.

Incongruity Theory is the dominant theory of humor. It explains humor from a cognitive point of view, which claims that humor is created by the conflict between what is expected in a joke and what actually happens. It can be used to clarify the most evident characteristic of humor, which is ambiguity, or double meaning. Because the word “Incongruity” suggests a dispute, the mismatch between anticipation and reality leads to a sense of humor. Aristotle first proposed incongruity in his theory of humor, saying that the best way to make people laugh is to set an expectation and then give the subverted or contradictory ideas ^[2]. Immanuel Kant articulated incongruity in humor. He argued that something absurd must be the source of laughter. Laughter is an emotion produced by the transition from expectation to nothingness ^[6].

Relief theory views humor as a device that helps reduce psychological tension, which explains humor from a psychological and physiological point of view. Herbert Spencer is the first to propound it, believing that laughter is the consequence of physical strength, that is meant to cope with unpleasant experiences. Laughter is produced as the energy spreads through the neurons supplying the mouth and the respiratory system, which is like a pipe for a bottle (Attardo, 1994). Another scholar who contributed to the advancement of this theory is Freud. He expanded on the view that humor is the release of tension, suggesting that there are two characteristics in this theory. First, it is a healing medicine that releases pent up stress. Second, he held the view that humor is a form of sanctioned resistance and veiled aggressiveness ^[3].

Superiority Theory expounds humor from sociological aspects. The content of the theory is that people may feel cheerful and even laugh at others when they see them making mistakes or going through misery. It is said that human beings tend to make fun of others’ gaffes ^[7].

In addition to the above theories, there are several other theories related to the study of humor. Some scholars choose to apply Sperber and Wilson’s Relevance Theory, Grice’s Cooperative Principle ^[4], Austin and Searle’s Speech Act Theory and Politeness Principle proposed by Leech. Hancher (1980) explained the generation of jokes that violate conversational implicature ^[5]. Attardo (1993) specified the humor by flouting Grice’s CP. And he argued that the flouting of the Cooperative Principle has a humorous effect because it is contradictory to the facts ^[1].

2.3 Previous Studies on Verbal Humor at Home

The well-known Chinese writer and linguist Lin Yutang brings the concept of humor into China. Lin Yutang (2012) explained from the perspective of Chinese culture in *On Humor* that humor has always existed in Chinese literature, and claimed that humor is a view of life, and it is natural and unaffected ^[8].

Lv Guangdan (1988) analyzed English humor with some basic theories of pragmatic research, such as conversational principles, conversational connotations, demonstratives, premises, speech acts, etc ^[9]. Nan Zuomin (2000) believed that conversational humor comes from unexpected changes in semantic categories. The reason for this change in semantic categories is that speech agents make special associations between linguistic signs and the context in which they are applied ^[11]. Zhang Xiuhui (2011) summarized humorous strategies in verbal humor from the perspective of the Relevance Theory and analyzed the linguistic means of their realization. Ma Li (2020) specifically explained how the characters in sitcoms use different rhetorical devices to violate the Cooperative Principle and realize the process of verbal humor ^[10].

Great efforts on the research of humor have been made by many scholars and researchers. However, as compared to the study abroad, the domestic study is far from sufficient.

3. Analysis from the Perspective of Flouting the Maxims of Cooperative Principle

Based on the material collected from Young Sheldon, this chapter explains violations of each the maxim of the CP, as well as the reasons why the characters violate the Cooperative Principle.

3.1 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of quantity is composed of two sub-maxims:

First, provide the information that is required. Second, the information provided is no more than required.

3.1.1 Less Information

June, Dale's ex-wife, slipped on a glob of hair gel at the salon and busted her knee up. Since she could not take a shower on her own, she called Dale to help. The next morning, seeing that Dale was not feeling well, Connie went to ask why. So the following conversation took place.

Dale: Oh, geez.

Connie: Are you okay?

Dale: Oh, I, uh, I tweaked my back.

Connie: Oh. How?

Dale: I was helping June out.

Connie: Well, aren't you sweet? What did she have you doing for her?

Dale: Yeah, this and that.

Connie: This and that, what?

Dale: Yeah. This and that and the other thing.

During this conversation, Connie asked what Dale has done for June. Dale should provide sufficient information to explain it clearly, but he answered vaguely. Therefore, the quantity maxim is violated in the answer of Dale. Besides, the reason why Dale violated the maxim of quantity can be referred from the plot above and below. He was afraid that Connie would misunderstand him because he helped June to take a shower.

3.1.2 More Information

Dr. Sturgis quit his job to work at a grocery store because he could not find the value of his original job. Sheldon felt sorry for Sturgis when he knew about it. He thought that it was a waste of Sturgis' talents to label a box of beans at the grocery store, and in order not to let Dr. Sturgis continue to waste his time at the grocery store, he tried to dissuade Dr. Sturgis. However, Sturgis did not listen to his persuasion, so Sheldon asked Dr. Linkletter to help persuade Dr. Sturgis. So there was a following dialogue between Sheldon and Dr. Linkletter.

Sheldon: I need your help.

Dr. Linkletter: Why are you in my car?

Sheldon: Well, I was waiting outside, but then an angry squirrel forced me to seek shelter.

Dr. Linkletter: What do you want?

Sheldon: I want you to talk to Dr. Sturgis.

During this conversation, Dr. Linkletter asked Sheldon the reason for being in his car. Sheldon said an angry sparrow forced him to hide in the car. Although Sheldon explained why, the information provided exceeded the expectations of the hearer, so that Dr. Linkletter felt a little confused. Sheldon's way of speaking violates the maxim of quantity, producing a certain degree of humor.

3.2 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quantity is composed of two sub-maxims:

First, do not say something that is untruthful. Second, do not say something that is groundless.

3.2.1 Intentional Deception

Suspecting that George was secretly dating Brenda at a bar, Connie went to the bar to ask Nick what happened that day, and told Nick to keep it as a secret. However, Nick later called George and told him about it. George was angry when he heard this, and asked Connie about her intentions. Then, they had a dialogue as follows.

George: Why the hell are you asking questions about me at the bar?

Connie: I don't know what you are talking about.

George: Nick told me everything.

Connie: Well, clearly, I was lying.

In this conversation, George knew that Connie had gone to the bar to ask Nick about him, but Connie did not know that Nick had betrayed her. Connie lied to hide her actions. When Connie was furious that Nick had told George everything, she admitted that she had lied. Connie knew exactly what George was asking but said she had no idea of it, violating the maxim of quality. The contrast between Connie's different attitudes produces humor.

3.2.2 Groundless information

Missy failed many times on her service in a baseball game, and the coach said that she suffered from yips, a state of nervous tension affecting an athlete in the performance of a crucial action. It is when someone is thinking about stuff in his head and something he has done a million times, he cannot do it anymore. Later, Sheldon could not remember a formula on his test. He thought that Missy infected him with yips. Therefore, they had a conversation as follows.

Sheldon: Missy! You gave me your yips.

Missy: What?

Sheldon: I froze on a test. That's never happened before. It's all your fault.

Missy: I told you it's not contagious.

In this conversation, Sheldon believed that yips is a contagious disease, and the reason why he forgot the formula in his test is because he was infected by yips. However, Sheldon's claims lack sufficient evidence. Yips is a state of tension that destroys concentration and spoils performance, and a symptom that only happens in athletes. Sheldon violated the maxim of quality by conflating the reason why he forgot the formula and Missy's missed service.

3.3 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Relation

The maxim of quantity requires that conversation between the two parties must be conducted under the same topic. That is to say, the contribution must be pertinent.

3.3.1 Irrelevant Information

Sheldon wanted to buy a computer which cost three million dollars to solve the Navier-strokes equation. Then, he came to meemaw for the money. The conversation between Sheldon and Connie is as follows.

Sheldon: Meemaw?

Connie: Mr. Moonpie, how might I help you?

Sheldon: How much money are you planning to leave me when you die?

Connie: Nice talking to you.

When Sheldon asked Connie how much money she planned to leave him in the future, Connie was supposed to answer the amount of money, but in order to avoid the awkward situation, she said something irrelevant. What she said broke the embarrassing atmosphere. On hearing her unexpected answer, people would be amused.

3.3.2 Topic Change

Sheldon and his sister were arguing in the room, and when Mary came home, she complained that George did not care about anything at home. Afterwards, George was admitted to the hospital with an unwell heart. Sheldon thought he should take the blame for his doings. Because he did not receive any punishment for this, he always felt bad about it. So he asked Connie how to live with himself after misbehaving and not being punished. Therefore, there is a dialogue between the two as follows.

Sheldon: Hello

Connie: Everything OK?

Sheldon: I'm having a moral quandary, and I could really use your help

Connie: Oh, moral quandaries. I hate those. Shoot.

Sheldon: You're the least moral person I know. How do you live with yourself?

Connie: I'm about to shut this door in your face.

In this conversation, Sheldon asked Connie how she accepted herself for making mistakes. Since Sheldon's words were too direct, like "you are the least moral person I know". Connie was very angry when she heard Sheldon's words, so instead of answering Sheldon's question directly, she said something irrelevant to express her anger.

3.4 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Manner

The maxim of quantity is composed of four sub-maxims: First, avoid obscurity of expression. Second, avoid ambiguity. Third, be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity). Fourth, be orderly.

3.4.1 Obscurity

George's mind was not on his studies, so he came to work in Dale's shop early after school. Therefore, the two had the following conversation.

Dale: You're early.

George: I was sitting in algebra and realized, don't know what "X" is, don't care what "X" is.

Dale: Boy, I hear "ex" and I think of a woman who took half my stuff. That's my problem.

In this conversation, "Ex" and "X" are homophones. Dale misunderstood "X" as "Ex", so he mentioned his ex-wife who took half of his fortune, which created humor. And George violated the maxim of manner by using the word "X", which may confuse the hearer.

3.4.2 Ambiguity

Professor Boucher was assigning homework at the end of the engineering class. Below is a conversation between Sheldon and Professor Boucher.

Professor Boucher: For your design assignment, you may decide between suspension bridges, truss bridges, beam bridges, just not Beau Bridges. And people say engineers don't have a sense of humor.

Sheldon: What are Beau Bridges?

Professor Boucher: That's all for today.

In this conversation, Professor Boucher mentioned that the first draft of the design can be selected among suspension bridges, truss bridges, beam bridges, just not Beau Bridges. Professor Boucher used a pun to make a joke. Bridge refers to a structure that enables people or vehicles to cross an obstacle, such as a river or railroad, and it can also be a person's name. For Professor Boucher, bridge takes the second meaning, but in Sheldon's discourse bridge has the first meaning. The word "bridge" is ambiguous, it defies the maxim of manner. The disparate implications of bridge reach a comical effect.

3.4.3 Prolixity

While Sheldon was doing homework in his dorm, Darren came to invite Sheldon to play video games. So the following conversation took place.

Darren: Hey, it's Darren.

Sheldon: Hello.

Darren: Any chance you play Dungeons and Dragons?

Sheldon: And how. I once created a campaign, set in 1940s London where Alan Turing was a character, and I had the mathematicians be magic users with theorems instead of spells. The intelligence officers were clerics...

Darren: "Yes" works. We're playing tonight and we're down a magic user. You in?

In this conversation, Darren asked Sheldon whether he would like to play video games with them. Sheldon was supposed to answer yes or no, but he added a lot of unnecessary information in his answer, which increased the cognitive load of Darren.

3.4.4 Disorder

One day, Billy was going to give Missy a basket of eggs, but Missy was not at home. Then Mr. Cooper and Billy had the following conversation.

Billy: Uh, hello, Mr. Cooper. Is Missy home?

Mr. Cooper: Hello, Billy. No, she's at church.

Billy: I brought her eggs from my chickens.

Mr. Cooper: I see that.

Billy: You can boil them or scramble them.

Mr. Cooper: Okay.

Billy: I like fried.

Mr. Cooper: Okay.

Billy: I don't like poached.

Mr. Cooper: Okay.

Billy: Thanks for your time.

During this conversation, Billy should have ended the conversation after explaining his reasons for visiting, but he continued to communicate with Mr. Cooper. Billy's illogical words violated the maxim of manner, and his puzzling answers have a humorous effect.

4. Conclusion

By deliberately violating the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle, a good humor effect can be achieved, and the Cooperative Principle explains the generation mechanism of humor to a certain extent. In addition, the reasons for violating the Cooperative Principle can be analyzed from the following two perspectives, one is to express the inner thoughts of the characters, and the other is to shape the personality of the characters. On the one hand, the psychological reasons why a character violates the Cooperative Principle depends on the situation. In most cases, the reason why the speaker flouts the maxim of quantity is that they do not trust the other party so much that they hide some information, or want to persuade the other party so as to provide more information than the hearer expected. If the speaker flouts the maxim of quality, it is probably because they want to hide the truth or make fun of others, etc. If the speaker flouts the maxim of relation, it is because they want to defuse embarrassment or avoid answering questions they don't want to answer. Therefore, they will divert the topic by giving information that is not relevant to the topic. If the speaker flouts the maxim of manner, it may be because they want to use a tactful, indirect expression to glorify something or to sarcasm and mock others. For another, violating the CP contributes to mold the disposition of the characters. The words that violate the Cooperative Principle in Young Sheldon vividly describe the personality of the characters.

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