

A Study of American Verbal Humor in The Big Bang Theory from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract: Many scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth research on verbal humor from the perspective of pragmatics. However, there are insufficient pragmatic researches on different forms of verbal humor. This paper tries to explore the characteristics of American humor, selecting American verbal humor as research theme, dialogues of the famous American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* as research corpus, and the principle of cooperation as theoretical basis. A large number of examples are used in the thesis to explain in detail how the humorous effects of American verbal humor are produced by violating the principle of cooperation. Through analysis, this paper finds the following things. Firstly, in American verbal humor, the humorous effects are often produced by means of ambiguity and rhetoric in dialogue. Secondly, on the subject of humor, American humor tends to produce humorous effects on topics related to religion, sex as well as the relationship between men and women. With the advancement of cultural exchanges between China and the United States, more and more American comedy works have entered the Chinese market. This paper intends to help people improve their understandings of American humor and better feel the charm of American humor so as to achieve better effect in cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: American verbal humor, verbal humor, Cooperative Principle, sitcom

1. Introduction

Humor is the art of language as well as a special linguistic style frequently applied in daily communication. In all literature, film and television works, humor has always been an eternal theme and highly cherished for its aesthetic pleasure. Moreover, humor is a kind of cultural phenomenon, and unique and disparate ways of expressing humor have been produced in different countries, due to their diverse cultural environments.

With the passage of time, there are increasing opportunities for people to access to foreign comedies, among which, American sitcoms have swarmed into Chinese market, showing its own particular sense of humor. *The Big Bang Theory*, one of the most representative works of American sitcoms, has attracted lots of Chinese audiences successfully, serving as important materials for analyzing the generative mechanism and the unique feature of American verbal humor under American cultural environment.

2. Significance and Research Questions

Verbal humor has received extensive attention from scholars due to its unique linguistic feature. However, from the pragmatics perspective, most previous studies analyze verbal humor were generalized since few focused on the unique feature of different types of humor, such as English humor and American humor. As a matter of fact, in different social and cultural backgrounds, disparate types of verbal humor have been created, each of which has essential differences and should be investigated pertinently and separately. Hence, in this thesis, American verbal humor is chosen as the research topic and *The Big Bang Theory* as research corpus, intending to answer the following question:

Through analyzing *The Big Bang Theory* under the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims, what are the features of American verbal humor?

A comprehensive analysis of American verbal humor can provide more insights into its generation and uniqueness, and help people better appreciate American comedies. Moreover, it also plays a positive role in enhancing the awareness of cultural differences between China and the United State, thus promoting Sino-American cross-cultural communication.

3. Structure

This thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter I is a brief introduction to the thesis, which consists of the research background, research purpose, and structure of the thesis.

Chapter II reviews the previous literature on verbal humor and American verbal humor, combining the Cooperative Principle, and summarizing the existing gaps and features of American verbal humor.

Chapter III elaborates on the theoretical framework of the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims.

Chapter IV focuses on conducting a case analysis, in which intend to explore the features of American verbal humor by analyzing dialogues from The Big Bang Theory under the guidance of Cooperative Principle.

Chapter V concludes the thesis, including the content of the whole paper and the shortcomings of this research.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Previous studies on verbal humor

Humor has always been a hot research topic, especially in the filed of pragmatics, drawing the attention of both aboard and Chinese scholars in this field.

The first verbal humor theory, namely the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH), was proposed by Raskin in 1985. Several years later, i.e., in 1991, Attardo & Raskin put forward the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) based on SSTH and the five-level model of jokes[1]. As found from the review of the previous studies on verbal humor, scholars are also inclined to adopt the other theories to analyze verbal humor than SSTH and GTVH: Austin & Searle's Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory and Leech's Politeness Principle.

Over the past years, verbal humor has been researched from varying perspectives.

Some scholars start with the function of humor. Holmes examined how humor constructed relations in the communities of the workplace and paid special attention to the range of gender in the office[2].

To explore the relationship between irony and verbal humor, Ortega analyzed humorous ironic statements under the guidance of the General Theory of Verbal Humor, based on which he concluded the positive effect of the coexistence of humor and irony[3].

Many scholars have invested efforts to analyze how humor effect is created and further extend the result into other fields. Zhang concluded the generation mechanism of verbal humor effect and applied it to English teaching [1]. Ma illustrated how characters realized verbal humor through the flouting of Grice's CP, and discussed the underlying reasons for the violation to better understand the characters' personality[4].

According to previous studies mentioned above, the studies on verbal humor are systematical and extensive; nonetheless, most of them are generalized since few researches focus on different types of humor pertinently and separately.

4.2 Previous studies on American verbal humor

American humor is generated under a unique cultural and historical atmosphere of America. Based on the literature review, scholars have summarized some features of American verbal humor from varying perspectives.

Concerning the literal aspect of language in the conversation, Zhao pointed out that American humor's uniqueness lays in its plays of words during conversation and using figure of speech includes pun, repetition, and metaphor [5]. According to Sun and Chen, they illustrated the important function of polysemy in detailed when creating humor effect [6].

From the perspective of humor's object, a common phenomenon in American humor is that a person targets himself as the object of humor [7]. Self-mockery can be viewed as an interactive and

humorous social interaction, which has two main interactional functions, i.e., saving face and bringing shared amusement to a conversation [8]. Noticeably, American people are fascinated by self-mockery, which is embodied in their beloved self-reference word “Yankee” [9].

Few scholars have mentioned the perspective of humor’s topics, by comparing American verbal humor with Chinese verbal humor, Ma proposes that when creating humor effect in conversation, American prefers to select topics that are open, free and targeted, such as politics, race, and religion [10]. This idea is supported by some other scholars, based on Register Theory, Sun further identifies sex and male-female relationships also are prevailing topics used by American people to achieve humorous effect in dialogue [11].

Based on the above analysis, the main features of American verbal humor consist of the application of polysemy and rhetorical device, and its unique object and special topics. Moreover, it can be found that few researches on American verbal humor are conducted under pragmatic theories.

Thus, this thesis intends to analyze The Big Bang Theory under the guidance of the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims so as to gain more insights into the uniqueness of American humor from the perspective of pragmatics. It is hoped not only to fill up the research gap but also to enhance the understanding of American humor, and actively promote the exchange of humor culture between China and the United State.

5. Linguistic Theory

In order to comprehend the implied information delivered in the conversation, H. P. Grice propose a mechanism called Cooperative Principle and formulates the principle and its maxims. He finds that “Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” [12].

To explain the Cooperative Principle more clearly, four maxims are developed by Grice as below [12].

Quantity Maxim

- 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
- 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality Maxim: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

- 3) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- 4) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Relation Maxim: Be relevant.

Manner Maxim: Be perspicuous.

- 1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- 2) Avoid ambiguity.
- 3) Be brief (avoid necessary prolixity).
- 4) Be orderly.

6. Analysis of the Language Phenomena

6.1 The violation of Quantity Maxim

Conversation 1:

Sheldon, as Leonard’s good friend, has been suggested not maintaining a close connection with Penny during their break-up. However, craving for Penny’s hot dog spaghetti, he decides to hide his true intention from Leonard during the dinner.

Leonard: Sheldon, I got you your tangerine chicken. I hope you're hungry.

Sheldon: Well, of course I'm hungry. And as I have no plans to eat with any other team, I will

consume my tangerine chicken with the appropriate gusto.

Leonard: Okay. (Episode 20, Season 3)

The sentence “Well, of course, I’m hungry” is well enough to answer Leonard’s question, but Sheldon still provides detailed information that is unnecessary for the conversation. The dialogue is centered around how Sheldon deals with his friend’s break-up, in which a humorous effect is generated through the violation of the Maxim of Quantity.

Conversation 2:

Sheldon has been stuck in the graphene problem for days, finally finding a way to figure out the answer. Therefore, he wakes Leonard and Penny up at midnight to tell them about his plan.

Leonard: What are you talking about?

Sheldon: Einstein.

Leonard: Yeah, I’m going to need a little more.

Sheldon: Albert Einstein.

Leonard: Keep going. (Episode 14, Season 3)

Due to the inadequate information provided by Sheldon, not only Leonard but also the audiences are confused, which creates a humorous atmosphere. In this case, Sheldon’s answer is over generalized without a specific explanation, which violates the Maxim of Quantity.

6.2 The violation of Quality Maxim

Conversation 1:

Sheldon and Leonard are discussing about anthropic principle. Even though Leonard know what the principle is talking about, Sheldon deeply believes he doesn’t understand and begin to illustrate the principle, then:

Leonard: I know what the anthropic principle is.

Sheldon: Of course, I just explained it to you. Where do you stand on it?

Leonard: Where do you stand on it?

Sheldon: Strongly pro.

Leonard: Then I believe that God created the world in six days, and on the seventh, he made you to annoy me. (Episode 1, Season 6)

In the sitcom, Leonard is an atheistic physicist, just like Sheldon. However, in order to fight against Sheldon he finds extremely annoy, Leonard demonstrates his point by referring to God and creationism, thus creating a humorous effect. Specifically, he violates the Maxim of Quality by saying something he believes that it’s false. Notably, the punchline of the dialogue is generated under the religious topic.

Conversation 2:

During Dinner time, when hearing “just fine” said by Leonard, both Howard and Raj begin to mock him indirectly after recalling Leonard’s description of his sexual relationship with Penny in the same phrase. This situation confuses Penny. At this point, Sheldon tries to explain to her what happens.

Sheldon: As I was saying, you and Leonard had a disappointing sexual encounter. Earlier this evening, Leonard characterized as "just fine". So what you're seeing here is a continuation of the mocking that followed.

Penny: Okay, yeah, well, I'm just gonna go eat my dinner elsewhere. Maybe an airplane headed for a mountainside. (Episode 2, Season 3)

This dialogue is unfolded based on the sexual relationship between Leonard and Penny, which makes Penny feel great shame and incredibly uncomfortable. Here, Penny violates the Maxim of Quality since she adopts exaggerated expression to convey the feeling that she would rather eat in an airplane headed for a mountainside than sit here to be humiliated. This amuses the audience to a large extent.

Conversation 3:

When Howard shows Bernadette around his work place:

Leonard: Hey, look, it's Howard and his girlfriend Bernadette.

Howard: Though I'd give the little woman a tour of the old salt mines.

Bernadette: He doesn't mean salt mines. He means where he works.

(Episode 3, Season 3)

This humorous dialogue is related to the male-female relationship. Just like what Bernadette has said, Howard just wants to show off that he has a girlfriend instead of taking her on a tour of the old salt mines as reflected in the words. The Maxim of Quality is violated due to the use of his working place as a metaphor for old salt mines, thus resulting in a humorous effect.

Conversation 4:

In another example, Penny is worried about the date with Leonard, who isn't her usual choice. Being afraid of losing a good friend if something goes wrong, she turns to Sheldon for advice.

Penny: Okay. Here's the thing. So I've known for a while now that Leonard has had a little crush on me.

Sheldon: A little crush? I suppose so, in the same way Menelaus had a little crush on Helen of Troy. (Episode 17, Season 1)

This humorous dialogue is constructed on basis of Penny and Leonard's relationship. In Greek mythology, to fight for Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, Menelaus started a war attacking Troy, indicating a huge crush of Menelaus on Helen. Equipped with a wide range of knowledge, Sheldon says something he believes is false to satire Penny's inaccurate description of Leonard's felling. Here, the use of irony in the sentence is inconsistent with the Maxim of Quality, thus creating a humorous effect.

6.3 The violation of Relevance Maxim

Conversation 1:

Sheldon deeply respects Leonard's mother, Dr. Hofstadter, who, like Sheldon, is also an atheistic scientist and holds unbearable feelings toward religious content. Hence, he repeatedly advises her mother, Mary, not to initiate religion-related topics.

Mary: Interesting. You can believe that, but God filling an ark with animals two-by-two is nonsense.

Sheldon: What did they feed the lions, Mother?

Mary: The floating bodies of drowned sinners, of course.

Sheldon: Listen, Leonard's mom is a renowned psychiatrist and woman of science. Can you please keep the Bible babble to yourself while she's here?

Mary: Are you ashamed of me?

Sheldon: Of course not. I love you. I'm just embarrassed by the things you believe, do and say.

Mary: Well, I love you, too. My little bowl of lion chow. (Episode 23, Season 8)

Hu considers changing the topic as another way to violate the Maxim of Relevance [13]. In this conversation, Mary's violation of the Maxim of Relevance is realized through the topic change from the behavior in front of Dr. Hofstadter to Sheldon's attitude toward her belief. Moreover, both Sheldon and Mary violate the Maxim of Quantity. Instead of "of course not. I love you", which is enough to support the conversation, Sheldon provides more information to express his boredom toward her mother's belief. Similarly, though "Well, I love you, too" is a simple answer, Mary refuses to contribute appropriate information as required in the dialogue. In fact, she ends the conversation with irrelevant information to express how she is fed up with Sheldon's nagging toward her belief. What's more, Mary's comparison of Sheldon to drowned sinners that used to feed the lions in Noah's ark also violates the Maxim of Quality, thus largely amusing the audience. All these violations of the Cooperative Principle depict the interesting interaction between Mary and Sheldon, thus reaching a humorous effect.

6.4 The violation of Manner Maxim

Conversation 1:

On the way to San Francisco, Leonard and his friends surprisingly find out that Summer Glau, a beautiful actress, is also on the train.

Howard: It's hot in here. Must be Summer. It's hot in here. It must be Summer. It's hot in here. Must be summer.

Raj: It's hot in here. Must be Summer. (Episode 17, Season 2)

To make a move and leave a good impression, Howard intentionally adopts puns based on polysemy as his opening line, which creates ambiguity in the meaning and thus violates the Maxim of Manner. Here, given the two meanings of "hot" and "summer", the audience can interpret the sentence in two ways. The literal meaning is "the weather is hot as summer is coming"; while the underlying meaning is referring to the actress whose name is Summer, suggesting she is very attractive and sexy. It is easy for the audience to catch the underlying meaning and burst into a laugh.

Conversation 2:

Except for Howard who is busy dating Penny's relative, Raj, Leonard and Sheldon go to the restaurant, however, Sheldon strongly refuses to order Chinese food without Howard.

Sheldon: I'm sorry, we cannot do this without Wolowitz.

Leonard: We can't order Chinese food without Wolowitz?

Sheldon: Let me walk you through it. Our standard order is: The steamed dumpling appetizer, general tso's chicken, beef with broccoli, shrimp with lobster sauce and vegetable lo mein. Do you see the problem?

Leonard: I see a problem. (Episode 10, Season 1)

The laugh point lays in "I see a problem" as said by Leonard. It can be explained from two perspectives. One is the answer to Sheldon's question, implying that he agrees with Sheldon's opinion that there is a problem when Howard is not around; the other is that he believes there is something wrong with Sheldon. In this way, Leonard creates ambiguity in syntax during the conversation, which violates the second sub-maxim of Manner Maxim.

7. Conclusion

This thesis examines features of American verbal humor through a case analysis of The Big Bang Theory under the guidance of the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims. Several findings obtained are summarized below.

Firstly, the humorous effect can be generated through the violation of the Cooperative Principle's four maxims. The Cooperative Principle is a powerful tool used to explore the generation process of verbal humor. In Chapter VI, the process of generating a humorous effect is illustrated in detail based on several examples. Secondly, through the analysis of The Big Bang Theory under the Cooperative Principle, this thesis concludes features of American verbal humor as follows.

To begin with, American verbal humor has a close connection with the ambiguity that occurs in the word or syntactic level. Ambiguous expression violates the Maxim of Manner and often serves as the laugh point to create a humorous atmosphere during a conversation. In general, puns are an effective way to create ambiguity because of the full use of polysemy.

Moreover, other figures of speech including metaphor, irony and hyperbole also play an important role in American verbal humor, which allows American people to express their feelings more vividly and deliver their thoughts more clearly. By using figures of speech, characters amuse the audience in the sitcom through the violation of Cooperative Principle.

In addition, it can be concluded from the analysis that American people are inclined to generate a humorous effect under some special topics, such as sex, religion and male-female relationship. This feature of American verbal humor is deeply related to the cultural and historical background of the country, as well as the linguistic environment.

This thesis focuses on one particular type of verbal humor to explore its uniqueness from a pragmatic perspective. It is hoped to deepen people's understanding of American humor and smooth the progress of intercultural communications in the future. However, due to limited time and insufficient knowledge, it as an attempt to analyze verbal humor still expose limitation and problems. The Big Bang Theory only represents a group of Americans, making it necessary to enlarge the corpus or find a sitcom more universal and able to cover more social classes in the future study.

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