

# A Study of Language Humor from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle: Take Friends as a Case Study

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**Abstract:** The Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice is one of the most important pragmatic principles. An analysis from the perspective of cooperative principle is conducted on the selected humorous utterance from the American TV Series Friends. The four maxims provide a relatively reasonable explanation towards the mechanism behind humorous utterance. The aim is to bring readers to a more profound understanding and appreciation of the nature of humor.

**Keywords:** Cooperative Principle, Friends, humor.

## 1. Introduction

As is known to all, humor is a universal phenomenon among human beings, be eastern culture or western culture. There is nothing rare about this phenomenon. People can find it almost in every sphere and every aspect of daily communication. You will come across it in TV plays, classrooms, politics, hospital etc. Funny situations funny stories, even funny thoughts occur virtually to everybody everyday. For centuries, there are many researches in the academic area. It has been studied in sociology, psychology, philosophy, linguistics etc. As humor is observable in various human interactions and pragmatics is the study of meaning in interaction, in this study, the writer will study humor from the perspective of pragmatics, more specifically from Grice's Conversational Principles. (CP) According to Pocheptsov, humor can be categorized into two major groups: situational humor and language humor (also called verbal humor) Since situational humor has little to do with language, it will not take into account in this study. What we concern about is the language humor or we can say humorous discourse.

The paper consists of 5 parts. First part is an introduction to the whole paper. Part 2 is the motivation of the study and the data collection. Part 3 is about the literature review on humor and Conversational Principle. Part 4 is about how humor arouses by violating Conversational Principle. The last part is a brief conclusion.

## 2. Motivation and Data Collection

Actually the idea of studying humor arouse from the writer's own experience when she was watching American TV series Friends. Friends is the enormously popular comedy series having ten seasons which was broadcasted for ten years and it is a great example of how people communicate with humor. It is a half-hour show that covers almost all areas of communication of human life and that based on six diverse people. Since it is a comedy, the most sticking characteristic of this play is its humor effect. Everyone who watches it once would find it is full of laughter, so there must be lots of humorous utterance in colloquial American English, which may provide a dynamic, up-to-date, rich and authentic data for my research. So when the writer was watching, she could not help wondering why the utterances are so humorous. There must be some mechanism to generate humor, but she

did not know then. Now the writer found out that most of the utterances are violating the four maxims of Cooperative Principles.

The whole play is such large data, so the writer just chooses three episodes from season 4. There is no reason why the writer chooses these three. Because all the episodes are equally humorous, I just choose them randomly. The humorous utterances are found out under the criterion of ideal audience's laughter. There is ideal audiences' laughter, there must be humorous utterances.

## 3. Literature Review

### 3.1. Definition and classification of humor

Humor is a universal phenomenon; however its definition is difficult to make consent. Etymologically, 'humor' is derived from the Latin word 'liquid' or 'fluid'. Different disciplines may have somewhat different definitions. Even in some authoritative dictionaries, definitions are not entirely the same. In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 'humor' is defined as: capacity to cause or feel amusement. ("humour," def. 1888)

In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, it is defined as: a. the ability to understand and enjoy what is funny and makes people laugh. b. the quality of causing amusement. ("humour," def. 1888)

In Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary: Tenth Edition, it is defined as:

a. that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous. b. the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous. c. something that is designed to be comical or amusing. ("humour," def. 1888)

However, from these various definitions, we can still find something in common or rather some synonyms relating to the meaning 'funny or laughable', like amusement, funny, laugh, comical, amusing. More common to us, we treat humor as the attributes of an event that makes us laugh. To Palmer, humor is everything that is actually funny and humor is also the processes by which this 'funnies' occurs. (3) So in this sense, humor is something that makes people laugh and it is in this sense that we find humorous utterance in this study.

According to Pocheptsov, humor can be categorized into two major groups--- situational humor and language humor (also called verbal humor), () as we have mentioned above.

Since situational humor has little to do with language, we'll not consider it in this study. What we concern is language humor, or humorous utterances.

### 3.2. Cooperative principle

In daily life, we do not talk with disconnected speeches; otherwise, the communication would break down. As American philosopher Paul Grice pointed in his *Logic and Conversation* "our talk exchange do not normally consists of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did." (370) That means in order to make the communication work out, people must abide by some rules. He also maintains: they are characteristically, to some degree at least, and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. (370) The purpose may be diversified and may be fixed at the begging or during the cause of communication. No matter what the purpose or no matter when the purpose is fixed, in order to fulfill the purpose, participants are expected to observe a rough general principle, as Grice labeled 'Cooperative Principle'. 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. (370) That is to say the participants have to be in cooperative attitude if they try to communicate successfully. Under the general Conversational Principle, there are four maxims. They are as below:

**Maxim of Quantity:** Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange; do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**Maxim of Quality:** Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant!

**Maxim of Manner;** Avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief; be orderly. (George 37)

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Humor aroused by violating maxim of quantity.

The first three maxims are about what to say and the last one is about how to say. During the communication, if speakers all abide by the rules, the communication would be most efficient and most logical. However, this is not always the case in daily communication; people interact always violating one or ever more maxims. Some violations are on purpose while some are not. Humor is one of the outcomes of violating of the maxims. Though humor is not just one outcome of violation of the maxims, it can also be generated by other pragmatic devices such as deixis, presupposition, speech acts etc. In this study, we'll just study the humor aroused by violation of maxims.

According to sub-maxim of quantity, when people interact with each other, they should make their contribution as informative as is required for the conversation to be processed. However, people don't always stand to the rule and sometimes their over-simple answers confuse or even mislead the hearer, which generates humor.

On season 4 episode 1, the six friends went to beach to have a trip. One day, Monica and Chandler took a walk on the beach and Joey was digging a hole there. Then a wave crashed

on the beach, Monica was stung by a Jellyfish and it really hurt. Since it's two miles away from the house and Joey was tired out from digging the hole, they couldn't take her back to the house. Then Joey remembered something that the only way to do is to pee on it. It's a disgusting, but there's no way. At last Chandler peed on it. So it's a disgusting and embarrassing experience for three of them. When they returned desperately from the beach, Rachel and Ross asked them what happened, they said nothing, which however there was something that they didn't want to say. Later Ross asked again with curiosity, but Joey said it's between them and the sea.

Ross: what the hell happened on that beach?

Joey: it's between us and the sea, Ross. (episode 1, season 4)

He supplies not enough information for that question. By violating the maxim of quantity, the humor came out.

There is another example. In episode 3, Chandler told Rachel that he came across her boss Joanna on the street the other day. Rachel thought that was awkward, instead Joanna asked Chandler if he wanted to get a drink. Here is the talk after that.

Chandler: well, no, actually she uh, asked me if I wanted to get a drink.

Rachel: (laugh) you ah, you didn't say yes to that did you?

Chandler: No. No. (episode 3, season 4)

Later it turns out that Chandler's answer is inadequate, because Rachel finds Joanna is in Chandler's apartment. Then Chandler adds 'not at first'. Chandler is afraid to tell Rachel that he said 'yes', because last time he dumped Joanna which almost made Rachel get fired. So when Joanna came out wearing nothing but a towel, we can't help laughing.

These are two examples about inadequate information leading to humor. Also if the speaker provides too much information, humor can also be generated.

Chip is one of the Rachel's high school boyfriends who is now at Monica and Rachel's place waiting Monica out for a date. Once Chip made Rachel look for him for two hours while he was having sex with another girl called Amy Welch. How could Rachel, as a beautiful and popular girl in high school, bear that! So till now, Rachel is still mad about him and that thing. Look at the exchange between them:

Chip: hey, Rach! How ya doing?

Rachel: I'm great. I've got a great job at Bloomingdale's, have wonderful friends, and even though I am not seeing anyone right now, I've never felt better about myself. (episode 2, season 4)

So when Chip is greeting her but not expecting real information, Rachel says bunch of good things of herself, which she thinks will make Chip regret that it's his loss that he lost her. However, Chip's response proves that he is not at all interested in her, which makes Rachel rather embarrassing. In this example, Rachel provided too much information as required so humor arouses.

Later, Monica goes out with Chip with whom she always wanted to date when she was in high school. Monica is very exciting and happy. Finally she realized her dream. When she knows Chip is still doing the job at the multiplex that he did when he was a schoolboy, she asks Chip whether he is still living with his parents.

Monica: thanks, I'm set. Do you still live with your parents?

Chip: oh yeah, but I can stay out as late as I want. (episode 2, season 4)

Chip says yes and unnecessarily he adds he can stay out as

late as he can. It sounds that Chip is quite proud of himself that he can stay as late as he can, but he neglects the fact that he is an adult, a grown up man who should live on his own in his culture. As is known, American children move out their parents' house when they reach 18 or even younger, but notice how old is Chip. Later Monica said she finally went out with Chip in high school. That is to say over these years, Chip hasn't grown up a bit. That unnecessary information is quite funny which leads us to laugh.

There are still many other examples that violate the maxim of quantity (listed in appendix) in the play. We'll not explain them one by one here.

#### **4.2. Humor aroused by violating maxim of quality**

According to the maxim of quality 'Do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence', that means one's contribution to a conversation should be truthful. The first sub-maxim of quality is the most important one among all the maxims, as Paul Grice himself said 'other maxims come into operation only on the assumption that this maxim of quality is satisfied'. (372) Since the examples in which the second sub-maxim of quality is violated is perhaps difficult to find, In this study, we'll just leave it out.

The six friends went to the beach because Phoebe found out about the lady who knows her Mom and Dad. But later she found out her mother's friend is actually her birth Mom, which really shocked Phoebe. The birth Mom is now explaining the Mom thing.

Phoebe: how close?

Phoebe Sr: well, the-the three of us we were, kind of umm, a couple. (episode 1, season 4)

She says the three of them, she, Lily, Frank were kind of a couple, which to our commonsense is a paradox. How could three people be a couple! It's obviously not true. So it violates the maxim of quality, humor arouses from it.

Monica: I know!! (calls him) (on phone) chip? Hi! It's Monica. (listens) 'kay.(listens) 'kay. (listens) okay. (listens) okay, Good-bye. ( hangs up) oh my god, we just had the best conversation!!! (episode 2, season 4)

This is the utterance when Monica is making a phone call with Chip. After the call, she says she had the best conversation ever. Actually during the call, she just said okay all the time but noting else, obviously it is not true. She is exaggerating violating the maxim of quality which makes the utterance so humorous. So by violating the maxim of quality, some figure of speech will be generated such as paradox, exaggeration etc.

Rachel: oh sure I am, because you always have to be right.

Ross: I do not always have to be – okay okay. (episode 2,season 4)

This is another example of violating quality. The action of saying the utterance is paradoxical with the content of the utterance.

From the above, we can how humorous the utterances are by violating the maxim of quality.

#### **4.3. Humor aroused by violating maxim of relation**

Maxim of relation: according to the relevance maxim of Cooperative Principle, when we talk with others, our contribution should relate clearly to the purpose of exchange. However, sometimes people disobey this rule wither

involuntarily or intentionally and offer replies that apparently deviate the point of the conversation. When it happens involuntarily, misconstrue may produce humor. This is called misunderstanding. When it is used intentionally, the speaker may simply try not to face a problem or respond to a question directly. This is called deliberate misinterpretation.

After Phoebe's birth mother, Phoebe Sr said that three of them were kind of a couple, Phoebe was mad at her non-sense response.

Phoebe: I don't even know how that would work!

Phoebe Sr: well, we were...

Phoebe: (interrupting) I'm not asking. (episode 2, season 4)

Phoebe's utterance is not asking how that would work, but she is actually complaining about their irresponsibility. Her mother just misunderstands her, which Phoebe's interruption proves it. So her mother's answer is irrelevant to the exchange. Audiences will find it quite funny.

Let's look another example:

Ross: oh! Y'know I've got an extra futon.

Joey: Dude, you don't have to brag! We got noting here!! (episode 2, season 4)

We don't know here whether Joey misunderstands or deliberate misunderstands Ross's words. Actually, Ross is offering stuff for Joey and Chandler's apartment, because they got nothing after the stupid robbery. But one thing for sure is that Joey's response is irrelevant to Ross's offer. Joey thought Ross is bragging while he is trying to help. This is the misunderstanding of speech acts. This litter exchange is very funny by violating the maxim of relation or by misunderstanding of speech acts.

In this part, we have talked about misunderstanding and deliberate misinterpretation, speech acts are all mechanism of humor, but we just focus on the violation of maxim of relation.

#### **4.4. Humor aroused by violating maxim of manner**

Grice expressed this maxim in this way 'Avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief; be orderly.' Avoiding obscurity means what you said must be easily or clearly understood. Avoiding ambiguity means there is no more than one meaning expressed. Being brief and being orderly means what you said should be concise and well-arranged.

This is an exchange between Monica and Phoebe:

Monica: why can't you use the phone in here?

Phoebe: well, I'm returning a call from a certain mom at the B-E-A-C-H. I just spelled the wrong word. (Goes into the monica's room) (episode 2, season 4)

Phoebe found out her mother's friend living in the beach is actually her birth mother. At first, she was mad at her, but later it turned out that she forgave her, because she is her birth mother, who gave her life. But maybe it is a bit hurting and embarrassing still so she did not want her friends know. So when she wanted to return a call to her mother, she not only did not want them to hear, and refer to her mother as a certain mom at the B-E-A-C-H. This utterance is not so brief because one can say beach andthere is no need for one spell the word, which will certainly cost hearer's effort in understanding. It violates the maxim of manner from which humor arouses.

Phoebe is a girl who believes in superstition. When a cat ran to her guitar case, she thought it was god will. Her mother's spirit was in the cat, so she treated the cat as her mother, but her friends did not think so. Her friends could not bear her abnormal behavior, so Ross asked Phoebe how long

her mother was gonna with them.

Ross: So Pheebs, how long is your mom gonna be with us?

Phoebe: well, I'm not sure. I mean, I guess until she y'know, gets to the fact that there's y'know, a new mom. Y'know, I think she's worried that y'know, she's gonna, she's gonna be replaced. (to the cat, in a funny voice) well, that's not gonna happen is it? Noo. (Gets up) okay, I have to return a call in the other room. (episode 2, season 4)

Ross is actually complaining and laughing at Phoebe's non-sense. But just look at Phoebe's answer, she uses lots of hedges and not so well ordered, which itself reveals Phoebe's non-sense that the cat is her mother. It makes us laugh because it violates the maxim of manner.

In fact, there are many other examples of violation of maxim of manner. Because of the length of the paper, we'll not exemplify here; we will just list them in the appendix, if you are interested, you can see by yourself.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, we exam humor, take American TV Series

Friends as a case study, from the perspective of Conversational Principle. As we have illustrated above, humor can be aroused by violating maxims of CP. We supply sufficient examples to exemplify how humor arouses.

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