Analysis of principle of conversation humor in pragmatics

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Abstract: Pragmatics is a main branch of linguistics, and with the development of pragmatic theory, many researchers have made deep researches from various angles on humor analysis and achieved fruitful results. While humor, as a talk-art, plays an important part in our daily life; it can not only please other people, but also adjust atmosphere, and improve interpersonal relationship with presenting speaker’s intelligence and charm. As a phenomenon of language, humor attracts many researchers’ attention in the field of linguistics. Because humor can not exist independently, there is a close relationship between itself and language rule. Therefore, this thesis discusses the principle of humor from the four cooperative principle (Relation, Quantity, Quality and Manner) and presupposition three characters (Mutual knowledge, Appropriateness and Defeasibility) through analyzing a series of verbal humor dialogue. In a word, from analysis in this thesis, we know it is an effective method to analyze humor from the cooperative principle and presupposition, and they two really have made a great contributions to analyzing the existence of humor. In fact, with these two theories, people can avoid many embarrassing situations by creating humor.

Keywords: humor; pragmatics; cooperative principle; presupposition

Introduction

Conversation humor is a common phenomenon in our daily life, which has a distinctive cultural feature. Through using humorous and irony language, we can improve our interpersonal relationship and adjust dialogue atmosphere, in which people can be educated and enlightened in a pleasant way.

The forms of humorous language are various; however, it has similar effects no matter what any kinds of forms they are appeared. That is, it will make people in dialogue relaxed, have a pleasant mood, transmit information, express emotion, instruct behavior and so on. But if these language functions want to be realized, the language should be expressed clearly, no ambiguity, easy to understand and accepted. Russell ever said: “language is vague”. From the perspective of pragmatics, economy is an important character of natural language; it always tries to use the most economic way to obtain the best relevance. From the logic perspective, there is no any person who can be guaranteed not to make a mistake due to the ambiguity and different meaning of language. However, people can make a various conversation humor unconsciously to realize its special and different effects.

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1. Cooperative Principle and Humor

1.1 The Cooperative Principle

In our daily life, conversation has a great importance because it contains speaker’s information and through which speakers can deliver their messages. Grice believes that speakers and hearers can exchange their own ideas by developing their dialogues during the conversation. That is to say, to reach satisfactory interaction, they must obey certain rules or regulations. In other words, the two sides must cooperate with each other. That is Grice’s Cooperative Principle: Relation Maxim (Make your conversation relevant); Quantity Maxim (Make your conversation as informative as required for the current purpose of the exchange); Quality Maxim (Do not say what you believe to be false, and do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence and Manner Maxim (Avoid obscurity, avoid ambiguity, be brief, be orderly). The four principles are a reasonable and orderly conversation process; if the speaker could obey these rules in communication, they can catch their meaning precisely and achieve their communication target.

However, in our life, people often violate the cooperative principle on purpose or not. For this matter, Grice concludes four situations for violating the cooperative principle. First, the speakers violate quantity maxim, the speaker avowed that they violate the cooperative principle. Second, the speaker cannot obey the cooperative principle, otherwise, there will be conflict with other principle. Third, the speaker violates a certain principle on purpose, and they know the addressee could understand that the speaker has other motive, and then they can get the deep implication from noncooperation from words. Four, The speaker often violates principle by a certain reason, so as to generate special meaning, which is most concerned by Grice and is common in daily life. Then Grice points out that if in a conversation, the speaker violates certain principle, they must have their subjective intention, that is, let the addressee catch their implied meaning. Therefore, in practical life, the speakers do not always obey cooperative principle. Once the speaker violates the cooperative principle, the addressee can also catch the speaker’s meaning precisely.

Grice ever said: “Only when they( the four maxims) are flouted, does conversation implication occur” (1975). Therefore, in order to create humorous language, people always violate the cooperative principle maxims on purpose. At the same time, the addressee cannot get the information he or she wants, so the addressee may be puzzled by the speaker’s words. Thus, the speaker may enlighten hearer’s guesswork about hearer’s motivation. In this way, humorous language is created. In our daily life, humorous language is often generated by violating maxim of the cooperative principle.

1.2 The violation of the Cooperative Principle and Humor

1.2.1 The Violation of the Relation Maxim and Humor

Grice said: “I expect a partner’s contribution to be appropriate to the immediate needs at each stage of the transaction. If I am mixing ingredients for a cake, I do not expect to be handed a good book or even an oven clot (though this might be an appropriate contribution at a later stage)”. Grice means whatever you say is supposed to be relevant to the main topic, so that the two sides in conversation could talk on the same subject. In other words, the messages provided by the speakers should be relevant and related. Sometimes in order to generate conversational implication, which is of the essence in humor, people may violate Relation maxim, so humor is created.

In our daily life, there are many phenomena which violate Relation and create humor. For example: Jim’s Best friend and Jim broke a window while playing basketball and no one saw it except his younger brother. They went over and offered him a piece of cake to let him not tell. He refused it.
“I will give you my basketball” Jim said.

“No!”

“Well, what do you want to get?”

“I want to tell.”

This humorous conversation occurs after Jim got into trouble. To bribe his younger brother, Jim asked him what he needs by saying “what do you want to get”. His conversation implied that if the little brother could keep the secret, Jim would give him some reward in return. The only witness---his younger brother, however, did not want to keep the secret, and so the younger brother responded “I want to tell” whose implication is “I do not need anything in return and I just want to tell the secret.” What he said is totally irrelevant to bribery. In this way, humorous effect is created. And following is another example:

Andy: Last night a grain of sand got into my daughter’s eyes and she had to see a doctor. It cost me three dollars.

Jack: Last week a fur coat went into my daughter’s eyes and it cost me three hundred dollars.

This is a dialogue between two men in which the first man wanted to express that his daughter went to the hospital. At the same time, the second man used a similar expression to deliver his complain about his daughter. He said that his daughter had bought an expensive fur coat. The readers cannot clearly see there is an obvious connection between the two topics, which is against the relation maxim. However, when we hear the two man’s words, we cannot help ourselves laughing.

1.2.2 The Violation of the quantity Maxim and Humor

“If you are assisting me to mend a car, I expect your contribution to be neither more nor less than is required. For example, if at a particular stage I need four screws, I expect you to hand me four, rather than two or six(Grace,1975)’. This paragraph describes the quantity maxim distinctly. Grace’s statement means that while talking with others, one’s conversation should be adequately informative as required. Too much information is also uncooperative. Therefore, it will obstruct addressee’s comprehension and weaken his or her understandings. On the other hand, if the speaker violates quantity intentionally, there will produce humorous atmosphere. Here is an example:

Patient: “Doctor, please let me know the truth. What are my chances to recover?”

Doctor: “Just one hundred percent! The statistics shows that nine out of ten die from disease! Now nine of my patients have died from it, you are the tenth!”

In the conversation of the above example, the patient and the doctor were talking about patient’s condition. The doctor did not give enough information at first, which made the patient have prospect of his discovery. But when the doctor told the whole information, it turned out to be a mess. The following is another example:

Teacher: “Roses need water,” “Water your roses every day, or they will die.

One morning, mother saw Marry out in the garden and asked: “what are you doing there, Marry?”
“Watering roses,” said Mary.

“But it is raining now!”

“Oh, it does not matter, Mum. I have a raincoat!”

This example violates quantity too. The faithful girl just did as what the teacher said--to water roses every day (even in rainy days). Every reader with common sense understands what her mother intended to express--roses need not water in rainy days. But the little girl did not catch her mother’s meaning. She thought that her mother just cared about her health. So she answered: “Oh, it does not matter, I have a raincoat!”. The readers are amused and humor is created due to the deficiency of information. That is, her mother did not tell her flowers needn’t be watered in rainy days.

In a word, successful speakers have the ability to realize how much information can be absorbed by addressee in the conversation.

For example:

(Liu Xing goes to the internet bar and his mother keeps asking him what he did there)

Xing: “You’d better not interfere with my business from now on!”

Mother: “What did you say? I don’t interfere with your business? Why didn’t you say it when you are a baby? Why didn’t you say it when you were ill? Why didn’t you say it when you fell? Why didn’t you say when you cannot walk? You don’t want me to interfere with you now, because you are grown up and can do whatever you want? ”

In this conversation, the mother is very angry about what Liu Xin did and said. She is so angry that she cannot help talking excessively about the matter, which sounds humorous and obviously violates the sub-maxim quantity principle: Do not make your conversation more informative than is required. Let’s take another conversation as an example:

Dad didn’t get home on time, mother asked the son to call his father’s cell phone.

Mother: “Who answered the phone?”

Son: “A woman”

Mother: “What? What did she say?”

Son: She said: “Sorry, the telephone you dial is unable to get through.”

In this conversation, the son did not say that it is the voice prompts intentionally but a woman to pick up the phone in which he did not give enough information at the beginning. Hence, he violated the information principle in order to create a tense atmosphere.

1.2.3 The Violation of the Quality Maxim and Humor

Quality is the most primary principle in the Cooperative Principle. On normal condition, no one will tell the speaker whether his words are false or not so that the humor is created by accident. For example:

One day, a friend of Rose went to visit her. The maid stopped her at the door.
The friend asked: “Is Miss Rose at home?”

“No, she has gone out.” replied the maid.

“Is Mr. Jack at home, then?”

“No, he has gone out.”

“May I come in and sit by the stove?”

“No, it has gone out, too.”

From the above conversation, the maid’s words are clearly against logic--stove can not walk, but she said it was out. The implication is “I won’t let you in”. Or her master didn’t want to meet any friends. However, it is not corresponding to “Don’t say what you believe to be false”. Once the maid said the last sentence, she might be embarrassed for she violated the common sense. There is no doubt that it produces a humorous effect.

1.2.4 The Violation of the Manner Maxim and Humor

Grace explained the Manner Maxim as : I expect a partner to make it clear what contribution he is making to executed his performance with reasonable dispatch”(2002). That is, when talking with other people, one is supposed to give proper information which can make his or her expression clear, concise and easy to understand without ambiguous meaning. Once violating the Manner Maxim, it will generate humorous effect. For example:

Jim: “Tim, how was the horse-riding yesterday?”

Tim: “Not so bad, But my horse was polite.”

Jim: “Polite?”

Tim: “Yes. When I came to a fence, he let me go first. “

Here Tim didn’t tell the truth directly and clearly at first but only said “Polite”. His expression was not clear enough. This humor violates the Manner maxim--avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Presupposition and Humor

Presupposition has three characters that is mutual knowledge, appropriateness and defeasibility. By violating each character of the presupposition will create a humorous atmosphere.

2.1 The Violation of Mutual Knowledge and Humor

Occasionally, we will violate mutual knowledge by chance. That is, the speaker is speaking one thing, the listener is talking about another. For example:

Jim asked Tony: “what are you doing, Tony?”

Tony: “I am driving now”

Jim: “OK, hurry up, we will wait for you”
Tony: “No, I mean I will go to meet my friend”

The above mentioned conversation is talking two different things. Jim wants to ask Tony to meet him by saying “what are you doing”, but Tony said I will go to meet my friend. They did not get the same background, so the information transmits inefficiently which makes the listener obscure.

2.2 The Violation of Appropriateness and Humor

The appropriateness means that the speaker and the listener are in a specific background. By violating the appropriateness, the humor can be generated.

For example:

Mom: “Oh dear, your daughter is eating your tablet. What shall I do?”

Dad: “keep her eating.”

In this conversation, we know that her mother is very worried about her daughter by seeing her daughter eating tablet. But her dad could do nothing, because he is not in the tense atmosphere. If in the same atmosphere, the humorous impact will be produced.

2.3 The violation of defeasibility and Humor

Defeasibility means that we often deny presupposition in a certain context or in circumstance. In our daily life, we often create humor by violating defeasibility.

For example:

Jim is always playing guitar every night. But Tony wants to keep quiet.

So Tony said: “May I borrow your guitar?”

Jim: “Sure, do you want to play?”

“No, I want to keep quiet” Tony said.

In this conversation, Tony wanted to keep quiet, he said “May I borrow your guitar, but Jim understood that Tony wanted to play guitar. However, Tony denied the presupposition, because he just wanted to stop Jim playing guitar. Therefore, the humorous impact is generated.

Conclusion

Humor can be widely used in our daily life. No matter what kind of degree it developed, humor cannot leave our life far away. In our life, more and more people have realized the charm of humor. If you want to be a humorous person, you need to learn to make a sense of humor and learn to appreciate humor. Hence, analyzing the principle of conversation humor is very necessary. Humorous language always appears in a conversation form, some conversation is humorous because it violates some relevant rules. Humorous conversation, as a special conversation form, not only has pragmatic features, but also has semantic feature. In this thesis, we have discussed its pragmatic feature in conversation. Through this thesis, readers can learn some important theories in pragmatics as well as the relation between humor and
pragmatics. At the same time, it will help learners to learn how to make and use humorous conversation in our daily life so as to improve our conversation atmosphere and establish a good relationship between presenting people. Besides, Humor can also help us to create a relaxing environment and a harmonious atmosphere and at the same time, the speakers can enjoy it in a comfortable atmosphere. In a word, Humor can make our life colorful and more pleasant to live.

Reference