

A Pragmatic Study of the Verbal Humor in Modern Family

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Abstract: As the condiment of daily life, humor can be divided into verbal humor, body humor and written humor. From the perspective of Grice's Cooperative Principle, this article has conducted a qualitative analysis of the verbal humor in the sitcom Modern Family (season nine and ten) and concluded that the violation of the four maxims of Cooperative Principle lead to the humorous effect. Consequently, pragmatic research of verbal humor may provide explanation to the production of humor and unveil the logic and myth behind humor.

Keywords: Humor; Modern Family; Cooperative Principle

1. Introduction

Humor study has always been enjoying popularity in the field of pragmatics. Some scholars have conducted research based on conversations in movies or TV programs. Following them, this paper studies the verbal humor from the perspective of pragmatics by employing a hit US TV series Modern Family (season nine and ten) as the linguistic data to explore the production of verbal humor. Modern Family is a sitcom revolving the life of three connected American mid-class families, in the form of mockumentary. Since its debut, it has successively won Emmy Awards for outstanding writing in the comedy session for five times. This paper expects to deepen people's understanding of American humor by applying the Cooperative Principle from the perspective of pragmatics, focusing on the characters' dialogues and appreciating the classic humor in the show. What's more, in Modern Family, an epitomized American society is presented, including the love stories, friendship, current affairs, American culture, education system, race issues, and so on. Via studying its verbal humor, it can be beneficial for English learners to better understand American culture and learn the language in a better way.

2. A Brief Literature Review

Back to the fourth century BC, ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle had noticed the special phenomenon of humor, and studied it from the perspective of philosophy. Aristotle (BC 384-322) believed that "humor is an imitation of men worse than the average." In modern times, there are three basic conventional humor theories: incongruity-resolution theory, superiority theory and relief theory (Raskin 1985). Attardo (1994) later termed them cognitive, social, and psychoanalytical respectively.

For the past decades, scholars have studied humor from the perspective of pragmatics mainly in the fields of literature, movie and television (Chaipreukkul, 2013; Xu, 2019; Feng-shuang, 2021). Most of these studies are based on a single theory or principle, while Cooperative Principle is the most frequently-used theory to conduct humor studies (Wang, 2005; Chen, 2016; Song, 2016), which tended to discuss how those theories and principles provoked humor, and some of them somehow failed to combine theoretical exploration and real-life practices.

Cooperative Principle was the linguistic theory proposed by Grice who believes that in the process of people's communication, both sides of the dialogue seem to follow a certain principle intentionally or unintentionally in order to cooperate effectively to complete the communicative task (Grice, 1975). There are four maxims included in Cooperative Principle: quantity maxims, quality maxims, relation maxim and manner maxims.

The maxim of Quantity:

- (a) Make your contribution as informative as required.
- (b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The maxim of Quality:

- (a) Do not say what you believe to be false.
- (b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The maxim of Relevance

Make your contribution relevant

The maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous

(a) Avoid obscurity

(b) Avoid ambiguity

(c) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

(d) Be orderly

(Grice, 1975)

3. The violation of Cooperative principle in Modern Family

3.1 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of quantity regulates that information offered should be informative as required, no more and no less. There exist two situations in the violation of quantity maxim: providing more information than needed and giving less information than needed. In the first situation, the information given by the speaker is overloaded, which is beyond the acceptability of the hearer. The speaker may give some information that has nothing to do with the topic, which is something not expected by the hearer. Humor can be generated in that way. In the second situation, the provided information is not enough; therefore, the hearer has to speculate the meaning intended by the speaker's vague speaking. But if the guess is wrong, there exists a great chance of the hearer misunderstanding the intention of the speaker, which may lead to the production of humorous effect.

Scene: Phil and Claire are talking to the camera about their daughter Haley.

Phil: Haley's dating this genius astrophysics professor who's somehow making her smarter, because, last week, I called Pluto a planet and Haley laughed at me. Haley.

Claire: Haley.

Phil and Claire: Haley.

This conversation happens when Phil and Claire are talking to the camera about Haley and her boyfriend who is coming to have dinner with them. Haley has nothing to do with the word "smart" and she is the recognized silly girl in the family, and the one who has always been laughed at. Phil and Claire repeat "Haley" for three times, which is not a common situation in daily communication. This kind of repetition violates the quantity maxim. The repetition of "Haley" emphasizes that they can't believe their silly daughter knows more about astronomy than they do and that their self-esteem is hurt. Humor is therefore brought to the audience via presenting parents' intentional mockery to their daughter.

3.2 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Quality

The quality maxim needs the speaker's utterance to be true, which means people should be honest, and they should not say something which lacks adequate evidence. Nevertheless, in the real situation, people sometimes violate this maxim and tell lies deliberately for some reason, like making a joke to ease the tense atmosphere. The following dialogue is a typical example of humor that is produced by telling an obvious lie.

Scene: Gloria finds out that Jay has brought his dog to their family vocation stealthy.

Gloria: You brought Stella?!

Jay: No! She must have tracked us here.

Before vocation, Gloria told Jay that she wanted to have a romantic trip without the company of Stella (the name of their dog). But Jay can't rest assured of his dog, so he brought Stella with him secretly. When Gloria angrily asks if Jay has brought Stella with him, Jay negates the fact, and flees with his dog. It's obvious that Gloria and the audiences know that Jay told a lie, since what he has done and what he says is contrary to the fact, therefore, the humorous effect is achieved.

3.3 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Relation

Relation maxim is the third maxim of Cooperative Principle, which is the most frequently violated maxim considering generating conversational implications. This maxim requires the speaker's utterance to be related to the topic of the conversation. In real circumstances, people violate this maxim purposely to change the current topic of the conversation to avoid something embarrassing or unpleasant. The following dialogue taken from Modern Family will demonstrate how humorous effect is

achieved by violating the maxim of relation.

Scene: Jay is questioning his families if they think he overcooks the meat.

Jay: This bozo just told me that you think I overcook your meat. Is that true?

Claire: Dad, we love you, but you don't know what medium-rare is.

Mitchell: I've-I've given you a meat thermometer for three Father's Day in a row.

For the love of God, just use one!

This conversation happens after Jay and Phil had a fight. Phil told Jay that he was a better griller than Jay, which Jay finds unacceptable. And then he asks his families to answer whether what Phil says is true. Claire and Mitchell's answers should be "yes" or "no" and tell the reason in accordance to the relation maxim. However, Claire and Mitchell change to another topic talking about love and presents of Father's Day for the sake of not hurting Jay's feeling directly by telling the truth. When the audiences get the implied meaning of Mitchell and Claire's utterance, they will laugh out loud by the humor of language.

3.4 Humor Produced by Violating Maxim of Manner

The last maxim of Cooperative Principle is the maxim of manner, which stipulates the speaker's utterances must be brief and orderly. Ambiguous and obscure utterances should be avoided. However, to shun something unpleasant or embarrassing or some taboos, the speaker may violate this maxim by using euphemism, paradox or pun, which can also be understood by the hearer. In this case, humor is produced by violating the maxim of manner.

Scene: Gloria is acting wired, because she thought that Manny (her son) was hiding something from her.

Gloria: I am sorry, but when I asked you if you were hiding something from me, you got all defensive, and you boob-shamed me.

Manny: Because something did happen. Sherry and I . . . we joined our . . . We crossed that beautiful threshold into the physical expression of love.

Jay: Have you ever heard a straight guy describe sex that way?

Manny made a girlfriend in a trip, but he cannot take out any photo of her. His families think that his girlfriend is a fake one and he might be a gay. Gloria expects to behave supportively without hurting Manny's feeling, but she is acting wired physically. Manny knew that he was always a little boy in his mom's heart, and it would not be easy for Gloria to accept that Manny had grown up being an adult who had sex life. The way of Manny describing sex violates the maxim of manner, but it is a more acceptable way to tell the truth, which can also reflect Manny's queer character, thus bringing humor to the audiences.

4. Conclusion

From the above analysis of the dialogues in *Modern Family*, conclusion can be drawn that humor can be generated by violating the Cooperative Principle and its four maxims. And that explains script writers of the sitcom purposely violate the Cooperative Principle to produce humorous effects and attract audiences.

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