



Linguistic Basis of Humor

In Uses of Grice's Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) was originally presented at Harvard University in 1967 as part of the William James lectures. Once established, Cooperative Principle had a widespread impact on a range of scholar activity, from work interested in the narrowest issues of language meaning to work interested in the broadest questions of social communication. As is known, verbal humor is a genre of linguistics interaction that often emerges in daily conversation. This paper is aimed at probing into the linguistic basis involved in the process of language humor from the perspective of Grice's CP. It is also intended to reveal the relation between creation of humor and violation of cooperative principle, and then give critical comments on Grice's cooperative principle, which mainly focuses on limitations Grice's cooperative principle. Finally, the essay has a natural conclusion for contribution of study pragmatics of conversational principle, and its application in other fields.

Keywords: Grice's Cooperative Principle, humor, violation

1. Introduction

Humor springs from daily life, and it is often used to picture the profound understanding for reality. Sometimes people express their opinion and ideas with concise, humorous, dramatic, exaggerating and sarcastic method to achieve certain effects, thereby people could feel content and funny, and even get enlightenment and meditation. In addition, humor also has feature of flexible practicability, which reflects the intrinsic rules and characters of English language from various aspects and different points.

Actually many researchers have done a lot of work from different aspects to study humor. Generally, it includes two aspects: one is to focus on the definition, history and evolvement of humor. American sociologist Koller (1998) is a typical researcher. In his work - *Humor and Society: Explorations in Sociology of Humor* - he fully illustrates humor from definition of humor to its social function and historical development and transformation in social point of view. His humor study mainly focuses on psychology and sociology aspects but it is out of pragmatics involved. On the contrary, the other is to use pragmatics as a frame, analyzing the creation of humor. Hancher (1980) states that humor comes out by violating speech act in appropriate condition or related conversational implicature theory. Raskin (1985) separates humor dialogs from common conversation and presents the theory of humor's cooperative principle that listener actually does not expect speaker to tell the truth or give related information. Yamachi (1988) firstly applies the mention theory to explain humor and argues the assumption of character violation. Attardo (1993) tries to expound the substance of humor and reveals the result of violation of Grice's cooperative principle.

Altogether, there are already a lot of literatures that illustrate the creation of humor from the pragmatics view. However, comparatively speaking it seems few works to explore humor with discourse analysis. So this article is trying to apply pragmatic theory of cooperative principle as well as its four maxims combined with discourse analysis to disclose the feature of English humor, and to reveal as well the relationship between the creation of English humor and violation of Grice's cooperative principle.



2. Proposal of Grice’s CP

Sometimes we all know how to make a conversation with others, however, few people can expound what is necessary to have a conversation going on wheels. Grice noticed that human language is a creative and flexible system that makes communication, but for the communication to be not only possible but also successful, it should possess certain qualities. Paul Grice (1975) proposes that in ordinary conversation, speakers and hearers share a Cooperative Principle (CP). The CP itself states as follows, “*Make your conversation 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*” (Grice, 1975, 45). It implied that speakers need not supply information that speakers can assume that hearers already have.

Grice (1975) in his *Logic and Conversation* also analyzes cooperation as involving Four Maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Speakers give enough and not too much information to accord the maxim of quantity. They are genuine and sincere, speaking truth or facts to meet the maxim of quality. Utterances are relative to the context of the speech to fill the maxim of relation. Speakers try to present meaning clearly and concisely, avoiding ambiguity to satisfy the maxim of manner. His cooperative principle is based on the assumption that language users tacitly agree to cooperate by making their contributions to the talk as is required by the current stage of the talk or the direction into which it develops. The detailed four underlying maxims are as follows:

Quantity: a contribution should be as informative as is required for the conversation proceed. It should be neither too little, nor too much.

- 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required.
- 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Quality: speakers should be truthful. They should not say what they think is false, or make statements for which they have no evidence.

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

Relation: speakers’ contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.

That is to say participants should speak out something to be relevant to topic.

Manner: speakers’ contributions should be perspicuous.

- 1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- 2) Avoid ambiguity.
- 3) Be brief.
- 4) Be orderly. (Grice, 1975:47)

How let’s see how to interpret the four maxims of Grice’s principle.

a. Maxim of Quantity is to “say as much as is helpful but no more and no less”.

Example: A: Bill and Martha are leaving tomorrow.

B: I’ll miss Martha. (Attardo, 1994:23)

In this example, speaker B flouts the maxim of quantity (as his response only attends to part of the topic initiated by A). As a result, the deliberate omission can be said to imply that perhaps he is not so fond of Bill.

b. Maxim of Quality refers to “Be as truthful as is appropriate.”

The hearer assumes that the speaker is not knowingly telling a lie or fantasy. Fair enough, and maybe routinely that is indeed the case. What is more interesting is what happens when someone flouts maxim of quality. Suppose the conversation goes like this:

Example: Tom: *I might win the lottery*

Jean: *Yes, and pigs might fly.* (Attardo, 1994:24)

The obviousness of the untruth of Jean’s reply gives our cognitive system a huge nudge. Jean is flouting the maxim of quality, so there must be something else going on, and so we start a hunt for likely inferences we can make. Here we quickly settle on the implication that Tom’s chances of winning the lottery are about the same as



pigs flying. Flouting the maxim of quality is the driving force in irony.

c. **Maxim of Relevance** means “Make what you say borne on the issue at hand”.

Example: *Jim: Where’s the roast beef?*

Mary: The dog looks happy. (Attardo, 1994:26)

Any competent speaker knows that Mary means something like “For answer to your question, the beef has been eaten by the dog”. Of course, she doesn’t say that we work it out on the basis. First, that what she says is relevant to what she’s been asked. If she is mentioning the dog, then the dog must be some kind of answer. This is perhaps the most utterly indispensable and foundational assumption we make about the talk we hear that it’s relevant to what has immediately gone before.

d. **Maxim of Manner** can be interpreted as “Be concise, to the point, etc.”

Let’s use this maxim to see how a speaker can make listeners draw quite extensive implications by the way they definitely go against the maxim of manner. Suppose you overheard two parents say to each other:

A: Let’s get the kids something.

B: OK but not I-C-E C-R-E-A-M [spelling it out]. (Attardo, 1993:537)

B is going out of their way to be a bit obscure, spelling out the words rather than simply saying them. B is utterly failing to co-operatively follow the maxim of clarity and conciseness. B is being so openly that A can infer that there must be a special reason for being so uncooperative: the likely inference, of course, is that B doesn’t want the kids to complain that they’re being denied a treat.

This essay is designed to employ Grice’s Cooperative Principle and accompanying maxims as basic theory to reveal the relation between creation of humor and violation of cooperative principle. Eventually, the essay has a natural conclusion for contribution to studying pragmatics of conversational principle, and its application in other fields.

3. Analysis of Humor in Violation of Cooperative Principle

Humor is wildly known as something that causes laughter or arouses people’s interests, such as funny words, gestures and facial expressions. It has many ways to show out, and usually to be classified by representation forms. Literature humor, stage humor and language humor are its popular media to display. Here we only focus on language humor, because the process of social activities mostly takes place through conversation, thus humor most likely comes out from people’s daily language communication.

Grice’s CP is a core theory that is used to analyze and control people’s conversation. We’ve followed Grice’s principle since we learn to speak, and we’ve been guided by these maxims all the time. However, in people’s daily conversation, Grice’s maxims are not always obeyed. It seems when the maxims are violated, the speakers apparently wish to end the conversation, or wish to avoid the conversation. Otherwise, they may suppose to break some of the maxims consciously, and expect the listener to understand that the violation is occurring and why it happens.

Yet under some circumstances, the violation of cooperative principle and accompanied four maxims isn’t only intent to terminate the conversation, but also brings comedy effect sometimes. That is to say if humor happens in conversation, it is often in relation to the violation of the conversational cooperative principle from some point of view. Humor actually can be derived from the deliberate flouted maxims. Therefore, deliberate violation of CP is the linguistic basis of humor.

Now let’s study some short humorous dialogs, so as to reveal the fundamental relation between violation of Grice’s CP and creation of English humor.

3.1 The Maxim of Quantity and Humor

It means that people do not make contribution more informative than required. When speakers break the quantity maxim consciously, and do not provide what’s addressees required or give much more than needed, humor breaks out consequently. Let’s take some examples.

1) The Lack of Required Information Makes Humor.

Suppose the conversations went like these:

An old lady was strolling through the park when she saw Jamie with a dog. “Does your dog bite?” she asked.



“No.” side Jamie. When the old lady tried to pet the dog, it almost bit her finger off. “I thought you said your dog doesn’t bite!” screamed the old lady with blood dripping from her hand. “That’s right,” answered Jamie, “My dog doesn’t bite, but that’s not my dog.” (Dong, 1992:2)

In this humor, the old lady sees Jamie with a dog together, then raises an question naturally, “Does your dog bite?” trying to get more information about the dog. But Jamie gives the information a little bit less than expected, “No”. Accordingly, it causes the old lady to suppose that dog is good-tempered, and then she rests easy and pets the dog; however, the dog almost bites her finger broken. Of course, the old lady screams, scolding Jamie for telling lies. To the old lady’s surprise, Jamie gives the reply that her dog indeed doesn’t bite, but the real fact is, that’s not her dog. As a result, the answer made the lady speechless.

2) Provided information more than required makes humor.

Example: *Soprano: Did you notice how my voice filled the hall last night?*

Contralto: Yes, dear. In fact, I noticed several people leaving to make room for it. (Dong, 1992:12)

This humor occurs when one of the speakers supplies information more than necessary. Soprano is very proud of her own voice, and meanwhile expects to get other people’s acceptance. Then she asks a Contralto, “*Did you notice how my voice full filled the hall?*” Contralto responds, “*yes, dear.*” Actually, it has already contented Soprano’s vanity; however, Contralto also adds more information than required, “*I saw that the audiences left to empty space for your voice.*” This additional complement implies the performance of Soprano isn’t so brilliant that the audience couldn’t bear and walk away. So the additional comment reveals to us a great contrast between the Soprano’s expectation and the Contralto’s response. Consequently the reader can imagine the embarrassment and depression of Soprano. Thus the violation of the quantity maxim makes humorous effect in the conversation.

3.2 The Maxim of Quality and Humor

As stated above, utterances demand to obey the maxim of quality. One should try to be truthful, and does not give information that is false or that is not supported by evidence.

(Once, a little boy went into a barber’s shop. He asked for a shave. The barber told him to sit down, soaped his face and then left. The boy waited for 10 minutes and at last he lost his patience.)

Example: “*Well,*” he shouted, “*what are you leaving me here for all this time?*”

The barber replied, “I’m waiting for your beard to grow.” (Li, 2002:32)

In this story, it seems the little boy so eagerly wanted to show himself a grown-up so that he could shave face in the Barber’s, while the humorous barber didn’t refuse the boy directly, instead, he treated the little boy like other adult customers, got him seated, plastered the soap, and then the barber left. The little boy was too impatient to wait so long, yelling for why it took such a long time to serve him. The humor springs up from the barber’s answer. He said he was waiting for the boy’s beard coming out. As is known, men are supposed to have beard after adolescence. Fro the little boy, it will take many years to wear beard. Obviously, the barber told untruthful words to the kid, and violated the second maxim of cooperative principle. But for breaking the maxim of quality, the barber intended to tell the little boy that he was still too young to shave. Accordingly, the humorous effect is produced for the barber’s words disobey the objectivity.

3.3 The Maxim of Relation and Humor

The teller tries to be relevant, and says things that are pertinent to the discussion. The participants purposed achieving the same intention. Once the contravention of the relation maxim emerges in conversation, the conversation will be directed towards crossroad or ceasing, moreover it may fetches the humor. Let’s illustrate the following examples.

Example: *Chemistry teacher: What is water?*

Dirty-looking boy: A colorless liquid that turns black as soon as I put my hands in it. (Li, 2002: 33)

Chemistry teacher asked a question what water was, and she expected the students to explain the question from the molecular point of view. However, the dirty-looking boy gave a plausible reply, “*A colorless liquid that turns black as soon as I put my hands in it*” It seemed a reasonable answer in daily life, but it was an unrelated answer to chemistry course; consequently it brings humor to the class.

3.4 The Maxim of Manner and Humor

The maxim of manner is generally governs the way you choose to construct your conversation contributions. The



general idea is that you should speak as clearly as possible, using language appropriate to your listener and the context. It also prevents you from holding a filibuster and requires that you at least try to organize what you say before you begin speaking. Let's use this maxim to see how a speaker can make listeners draw quite extensive implications by the way they flagrantly go against the maxim of manner.

A very shy guy goes into a bar and sees *a beautiful woman sitting at the bar. After an hour of gathering up his courage, he finally goes over to her and asks tentatively, "Um, would you mind if I chatted with you for a while?"*

To surprise she responds by yelling, at the top of her lungs, "No, I won't sleep with you tonight!"

Everyone in the bar is now starting at them. Naturally, the guy is hopelessly and completely embarrassed and he slinks back to his table. After a few minutes, the woman walks over to him and apologizes. She smiles at him and says, "I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. You see, I'm a graduate student in psychology and I'm studying how people respond to embarrassing situations."

To amaze he responds, at the top of his lung, "What do you mean \$200?" (Yang, 2003:11)

From the conversation above, it's apparently both the boy and the girl are persisting in violating the maxim of manner. Based on the context, we don't know what really happened between them. At first, the girl makes embarrassment to the boy. Then the boy gives a return as well. Not only does he make himself out of embarrassment, but also plays trick on the girl. The utterance is filled with illegible and unorganized sentences, however, readers can tell the humor easily.

According to analysis of all dialogs from four maxims above, we can conclude that humor often results from perceived violations of cooperative principle and its maxims. Grice's cooperative principle has already been regarded as precondition to context successful conversation, but in some given situation people try to achieve purpose or carry out special effect, occasionally, they have to flout this principle deliberately or unconsciously. Whereas when the cooperative principle and maxims are violated, we would not simply think speakers disobey the conversational rules or non-cooperate, on contrary, they do implement principles from the other side of coin, herein humor births in the special conversation.

Surely, there are some limitations in Grice's cooperative principle itself. The major weakness in Grice's theory is probably that it paints a rather ideal picture of the social conditions of communication. Although he admits that there are many situations in which speakers do not cooperate, nevertheless, the theory still sees cooperation as the universal disciplines in social interactions.

A second weakness is undoubtedly that Grice's scheme requires a similarity in background knowledge between the speakers for successful conversation. For instance if the speaker's premises in conversation are different from the hearer's, the hearer may infer something which is not intended by the speaker or is far away to the topic, however, these similarities are not the most necessary. Because people's conversation is so unpredictable and changeable, and the talkers have a lot of chances to update their knowledge of their co-interlocutor's background assumptions or just find hints from other factors making topic done.

So we couldn't simply conclude that Grice's cooperative principle is only factor to settle successful conversation, similarly violating these principle is not exclusive condition for creating humor. The purpose of this essay is to work out the relation between violation of Grice's cooperative principle and creation of humor, so that when we enjoy some humor, we could understand it trying to analyze from the view of violating or flouting Grice's cooperative principle.

By study creation of humor, we could find out many jokes involving the tellers playing with these four maxims of Grice's cooperative principle. For understanding the core meaning in humor discourse, it mainly depends on context, and certainly it is also necessary to know some basic pragmatics theory guiding us. With these two aspects of learning, we could have an enjoyable comprehension and better analysis of humor, especially it helps us to feel ease for communication in cross-culture situation. As we have rules to obey, it is less changeable to understand and analyze humor; moreover we could deeply understand humor from different sides.

4. Conclusion

From the study above, Grice's CP as well as his four maxims could be explained that successful conversation requires two parties communicate sincerely and clearly, giving relevant and enough information for the sake of making conversation work. However, leading to the unrelated topic, or distorting the implicated meaning happens to serve the primary factors to cause humor; moreover, the exaggerated expression and ambiguous



statement are the main reasons for producing comic effect as well. Accordingly, inevitably the violation of CP has close relation with creation of humor. Therefore, CP, as the basic theory fully including these language ingredients, is applied to expound the linguistic basis of humor in this essay.

Returning to the topic, for clear understanding humors, on one side, we need to depend on some essential pragmatics knowledge to help analyze how it comes in cross-culture communication and foreign language learning; on the other side, we need to read out the implied meaning relying on the specific context so as to find out what is the real intention by the speaker. With study of the comprehensive explanation of Grice's CP as well as its accompanying four maxims, we can better taste the profound meaning of humors so as to work out what is the intrinsic significance of humor.

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