

# Study of Verbal Humor in Modern Family from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

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## Abstract

**Modern Family is suitable research material for scholars because of its subtitle translation and the conversational skills. This paper studies the humor with rhetorical devices in Modern Family from the perspective of Cooperative Principle in pragmatic. On the basis of the theory in detail, it analyzed the wonderful examples in Modern Family one by one based on the violation four maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner. Considering the research on the humorous language in the sitcom, it can help people understand and learn humor from different cultures better.**

## Keywords

**Verbal humor; Violation of Cooperative Principle; Modern Family.**

## 1. Introduction

Modern Family enjoys wide popularity, which is mainly due to its distinctive language features. In this play, the features of characters are distinct by using rhetorical devices. The creation of characters cannot be done without a variety of techniques such as euphemism, ellipsis, personification, and so on. Owing to the cultural differences between the United States and China, people's way of thinking and way of life are also very different, so the dialogues between the characters are very different from those in China. There was a comparative analysis of the dialogue to conclude and summarize the character's characteristics reflected by the main characters' violation of the Cooperative Principle (CP), and explained the internal causes of character tragedy. As is said by Walter (1985), it is important that recognition of the intention of joke can proceed through explanatory stages.

Although there are many articles analyzing many works through the principle of cooperation, there still too many things to explore. Duan &Li (2020) analyzed the Modern Family and explored the Chinese translation of subtitles. Ma Xueshuo (2020) made a study on the translation of blending words of Modern Family in the multimodal discourse analysis. It was better to study in the context of Grice's works as a whole rather than in isolation (Hadi, 2013). As is noted by Attardo (1994), "the creation of humor derides from the conversational implicature, but it is a successful type of communication with people." Therefore, this paper studies Modern Family from the perspective of CP, analyzes the generation of humor by using the relevant CP, breaks through the traditional study mode of humor from the perspective of micro-linguistics.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Grice put forward four categories: quantity, quality, relation and manner. The four maxims of CP are as follows. First, quantity indicates that making contribution as is informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange and do not make your contribution more informative than is required (Hu, 2017:176). Second, quality requests what you believe to be false and you lack adequate evidence (Hu, 2017:176). Third, relation is being relevant. Last, manner is being perspicuous-avoid obscurity of expression, avoid ambiguity, be brief and be

orderly. When it comes to Grice's CP, both sides hope that they will abide by certain principles. But in many cases, neither side may strictly abide by the principles. The violation reflects the difference between Chinese and Western culture, which two large and independent cultures are the accumulation of long history and people (Jia, 2021). Generally speaking, both sides must obey the CP to make the conversation carried out smoothly. In this process, verbal humor will occur. Although the speaker violates the principle of cooperation, its fundamental purpose is also to make conversation go on smoothly.

### 3. Embodiment of CP in the Humor of the Speech in Modern Family

#### 3.1. Humor Arising from Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

There is going to expound the humor of euphemism. Euphemism is derived from Greek words. The literal meaning is "word of good omen" (Zeng, 2007: 157). It can make the communication humorous and tactful so that will avoid embarrassment, taboos and offence. For example, in the season1, episode14, Alex wants to collect bottles for building a school for Africa with Luke's help. Alex brought a lot of bottles from Aubreys, because he had a super party yesterday at his home. Alex didn't know what Jagermeister was, so he asked his father.

Alex: what's Jagermeister?

Phil: Well, you know how in a fairy tale...There's always a potion that makes the princess falls asleep, and then the case start kissing her? Well, this is like that, except you don't wake up in a castle, you wake up in a frat house with a bad reputation.

Jagermeister is Germany's first brand, and it is a kind of liquor. This wine is popular. As you can see from the scene above when Alex asked his father. Dad answered them with a story. It is a clear violation of the principle of quantity. This is also more euphemistic. Dad also used the story to warn the children not to touch it, especially Alex. Because the story he told said that eventually the girl would have a bad reputation. It violates the CP, and Phil's answer was unexpected and created a comedy effect. It has the comedy effect, and the warning function to the child.

#### 3.2. Humor Arising from Violation of the Maxim of Quality

There are two types of humor, which include metaphor, and hyperbole. Firstly, metaphor is the most important figure of speech that points out resemblance but with no acknowledging words (Zeng, 2007:10). For example, in the season11, episode3, Claire wants to talk to this woman who is helpful for her work, so she always talks about her work from time to time. They are doing sports together with kids.

Women: I find this class hard enough. How do you do it with twins.

Claire: Well, uh, it's nothing compared to the babies I got to juggle at the office, huh?

Women: I know that feeling.

Claire wanted to get this woman's attention in a different way, so he always talks about work from time to time. In this conversation, Claire likens the people at work to giant babies. It shows that he is very serious about a job. The more things Claire said about what about closet the more likely she made a deal with her. This sentence uses metaphor to create a comedy effect.

Hyperbole describes things more deeply than itself, which is an artistic exaggeration of the facts (Zeng, 2007: 122). For example, in the season11, episode3, Claire wants to get in touch with a woman who can help her with her work, so he brought Haley's kids to class to show off in front of that woman.

Claire: Well, I don't care if you want to buy 10,000 closets. I'm not at work. I am trying to bond with my children. Bye. Hi. So sorry about that....

From this scene, Claire pretends calling someone at work. She talked that someone want to buy 10,000 closets. Usually nobody buys 10 thousand at a time. She said so in an exaggerated way to get that woman's attention. That creates a comic effect.

### 3.3. Humor Arising from Violation of the Maxim of Relation

Compliance with the maxim of relation is to ensure that the conversation goes smoothly, but sometimes for some reason, the talking person deliberately doesn't follow the maxim of relation to create some comic effect.

The first aspect of humor is irrelevant information. For example, in the season11, episode 3, Claire has always wanted to work with the biggest leader of the real estate developer. As a result, she is going to buy her a glass of café latté to chat with her and then talk about business.

Claire: Sheryl McCray, Powerhouse real-estate developer. I've been trying to land her closet business for years, but it's impossible to get a meeting. This article, though, says where she buys a latte every Saturday at 10:00. Today, I'm gonna buy that latte, we'll get to talking, and before you know it, she'll be buying a latte closet.

In this scene, the deal has nothing to do with café latté itself. This broke the maxim of relation. Consequently, it broke the maxim of relation. She linked café latté to the deal. Such conversation produces implicit meaning and humorous effects.

The second perspective is topic change. For example, in the season11, episode 3, Gloria is talking to her sister and her brother-in-law about business of chili sauce.

Gloria: It's amazing how well you've been doing selling Aunt Miranda's hot sauce. I don't want to tell you how much money I've lost trying to sell it.

Jay: I wouldn't mind having an exact figure...

Gloria: I can't believe that you guys are already engaged! Where did you guys meet?

In this scene, Gloria and her sister talk about the chili sauce business. Croatia says it has lost a lot of money. This time Jay wants to say the exact number. Gloria immediately changed the topic to avoid Jay saying about the number. Such talks violate the maxim of relation and create humor effect.

### 3.4. Humor Arising from Violation of the Maxim of Manner

At this aspect, there are two rhetorical devices, pun and repetition. Pun refers to a word or a sentence has two different meanings (Zeng, 2007: 149). For example, in the season11, episode1, Sherry comes to voice Jay's movie. And then she met Gloria, and had this conversation.

Sherry: Hi, Gloria.

Gloria: Hi, Sherry. Break your legs.

Shirley became Manny's ex-girlfriend but Manny still loves sherry. Gloria's attitude to Sherry is bad. On the surface, it means good luck for her performance. We can get out of Gloria's face. She means break your leg. He means give her a curse. Therefore, the pun method is used here, which violates the maxim of manner.

As for repetition, in the season11, episode 2, Jay just got home and called Gloria, but the fridge answered, and then the conversation came out.

Bridget: I'm Bridget, your new smart fridge. Can I get you anything?

Jay: No, thank you. Bridget, listen, I'm sure you're very nice and all that, but I don't need everything to be smart. I'm gonna go get a dumb Scotch, eat some dumb peanuts, and sit in a dumb chair.

In this scene, Jay said the word dumb three times. It is because the refrigerator has just arrived at his home, he is not used to this kind of smart thing. He used the word three times in a row to express his rejection of smart things.

## 4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to study the verbal humor effect in the sitcom *Modern Family* through violation of the CP, so as to make people know how the effect of humor produce, improve people's ability to appreciate literary works, films and television works, learn different thinking patterns, improve their attitudes towards daily life, and carefully enjoy life. On the other hand, *Modern Family* can bring people joy, but also as a research material in the academic field. It makes us not only comprehend different attitudes of life to deal with the trifles in life, but also enables us to use verbal humor more skillfully to express the ideas in different cultures.

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