

Analysis of Verbal Humor in Two and a Half Men from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

Chengshu Yao^{1, a}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Nanning Normal University, Nanning, 530299, China

^ayaochengshu1996@foxmail.com

Abstract

This paper probes into the verbal humor from the perspective of Cooperative Principle, trying to find out the way to convey humor by flouting Cooperative Principle and its sub-maxims as well as the frequency of violating each sub-maxim. The qualitative method is adopted to classify 217 conversations in American sitcom Two and a Half Men based on the four sub-maxims and analysis the process of triggering verbal humor whereas the quantitative method is employed to figure out the frequency of violating each maxim. The result shows among 217 conversations, 63 conversations flout the quantity maxim accounting for 29.0% whereas 31 conversations flout the manner maxim accounting for 14.3%. Therefore, the conclusion could be drawn that verbal humor could be triggered via flouting the Cooperative Principle and the quality maxim is the most frequent maxim whereas the manner maxim is the least frequent maxim.

Keywords

Pragmatics; Cooperative Principle; Verbal humor; Two and a Half Men.

1. Introduction

Regarded as an important skill for survival, humor enables an individual to generate energy so as to shun embarrassment or get along well with others as well. With such a fast tempo life, despite the fact that pressure-free life does not exist in reality, people still could unwind through verbal humor.

With its debut on September 22, 2003, the sitcom Two and a Half Men was originally aired on CBS and it was directed by Robert Berlinger, earning reputation among Chinese audiences. This sitcom introduces a fascinating story about a dandy, his uptight brother and nephew. The main characters involve Charlie, Alan and Jake as well. Since at the very beginning, Jake is a little boy who can be labeled as the half man, the sitcom called Two and a Half Men. The author chooses this sitcom for the flowing reasons. On the one hand, personally speaking, the author likes kids very much and regards Jake the cutest kid in the world. On the other hand, sitcoms like Friends and The Big Bang Theory are mentioned so frequently on the study before.

Herbrt Paul Grice [1], the famous American philosopher, put forth the notion that four maxims should be get involved when it comes to Cooperative Principle, including quantity maxim, quality maxim, relation maxim along with manner maxim.

Four maxims of Cooperative Principle as followed:

1. The Maxim of Quantity:

- (1) Make your contribution as informative as required for the current purposes of the exchange.
- (2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

2. The Maxim of Quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.

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

- 3. The Maxim of Relation: Be relevant.
- 4. The Maxim of Manner: Be perspicuous.
 - (1) Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - (2) Avoid ambiguity.
 - (3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - (4) Be orderly.

(Grice, 1975:46)

The debut of sitcom provides an excellent database to help people analyze verbal humor. This paper probes into the verbal humor via American sitcom *Two and a Half Men* from the pragmatic perspective, namely, Cooperative Principle. Cooperative Principle, which was put forth by Grice at the very beginning, is employed to help to guide human beings' conversational activities. Generally speaking, a conversation which flouts Cooperative Principle supposedly brings about misunderstanding. Be that as it may, it is also a frequent scene that people flout it on purpose because by doing so, not only does it may avert embarrassment, but it could also exert unexpected humorous effects.

2. Review on Humor

There are 1114 related literatures about verbal humor from academic journals derived from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) between 2000 and 2021.

Table 1. Search Result

Subject	Literature Source	Dates	Total Articles
Verbal Humor	Academic Journals	2000-2021	1114

As figure 1 and table 2 show, from 2000 to 2004, there are merely less than 20 articles per year without exception and from 2005 to 2007, the published articles increase to 31 each year. The sharply increasing number of article manifests the attention of verbal humor from scholars in 2008. When it comes to the general trend, from 2000 to 2012 the articles related to verbal humor continue to increase, with 2012 reaching a peak of 117 articles, and later on it has a declining trend in general.

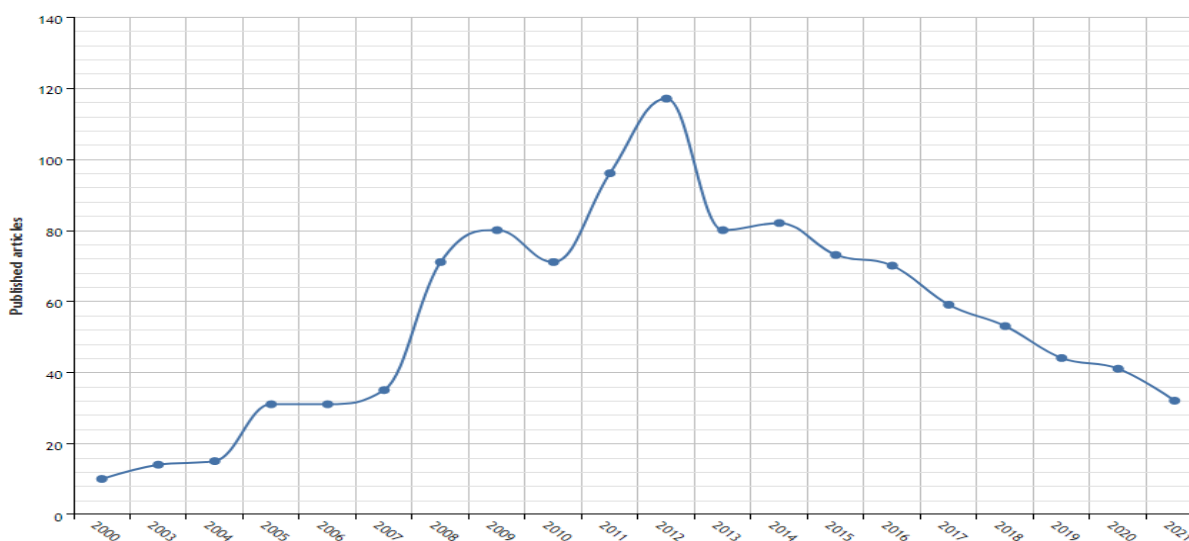


Figure 1. Publication Year Trend

Table 2. Publication Year Distribution

Year	2000-2004	2005-2007	2008-2010	2011-2013	2014-2016	2017-2019	2020-2021
Article Number	48	97	222	293	225	156	73

The top 3 journals based on the number of published articles are overseas English, Movie Literature, Foreign Language Research (tied with English Square), with 73, 21 and 14 articles respectively, among which Movie Literature and Foreign Language Research are core journals. Table 3 shows the five top core journals among 111 core articles, namely, Movie Literature(21), Foreign Language Research(14), Language Planning (9), Foreign Language Education(7) and Foreign Languages and Their Teaching(5).

Table 3. Core Journal Distribution

Core Journal	Movie Literature	Foreign Language Research	Language Planning	Foreign Language Education	Foreign Languages and Their Teaching	Other Journals
Article Number	21	14	9	7	5	56
Proportion	18.9%	12.6%	8.1%	6.3%	4.5%	50.5%

Speaking of the main subjects, the study of verbal humor is usually related to Relevance Theory (75) and Cooperative Principle (69), and sitcoms (29) such as Friends (37) and The Big Bang Theory (34). Since the study of verbal humor is usually related to linguistics such as Relevance Theory and Cooperative Principle, the discipline of the current study are mostly Chinese Language and Foreign Language.

Table 4. Main Subjects Distribution

Main Subject	Relevance Theory	Cooperative Principle	Friends	The Big Bang Theory	Sitcom
Article Number	75	69	37	34	29

Table 5. Disciplines Distribution

Discipline	Chinese Language	Foreign Language	Drama, Film and Video Art	Others
Article Number	516	436	92	70

Regarded as a ubiquitous tool in social situation, verbal humor plays a very important role during daily life. As a result, it attracts a multitude of scholars to focus on the analysis of humor, be it abroad or home.

The word "humor" stems from the Latin word "humere", denoting "body fluid" which could control human health and emotion. The definition of humor is extensive. Generally speaking, the definition of humor is that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous, a normal functioning bodily semifluid or fluid, such as the blood or lymph; physiologically, a secretion, such as a hormone, that is an excitant of activity. In other words, it could be acknowledged that one individual may attribute his temperament and disposition to these body fluids. Provided that those body fluids keep balance, one individual could be

considered as a humorous person. To crown it all, the definition of humor could be regarded as the ability, quality or tendency to exert a funny, amusing and amusing effect. In addition, it can manifest one individual keeps a cheerful and happy state of mind.

Walter Nash [2] considers humor as a part of culture, beliefs, attitudes, institutions, typical practices, characteristic artifacts and so on. As Lorenz [3] argues, in actuality, most of the jokes convey messages and provoke mirth by causing a sudden and unexpected tension. With the relationship between humor and practical use, Holmes [4] commented in his article about how the application of humor convey in the real life especially in the business. In China, indisputably, Lin Yutang was regarded as the first person who spread humor. He believes humor plays an indispensable role in life for the reason that a culture or country would not be prosperous without humor. Wu Tugen [5] probes into how humor produces via figure of speech and phonetic elements while Li Xueying [6] and Yu Yan [7] study verbal humor from the pragmatics perspective, namely, Relevance Theory and Cooperative Principle respectively. From the perspective of function, Liu Naishi and Xiong Xueliang [8] attempt to find out how to harness verbal humor to save face among speakers and hearers. Knowing verbal humor could vary from person to person, Wang Wenzhen [9] employs the questionnaires to collect the data among 180 subjects with different age, gender, occupation, education and so on, gaining a better understanding on how variables affect understanding verbal humor from pragmatic perspective. Viewed from Memetics, Li Jie [10] studies the way verbal humor could be conveyed by the variations of the language memes via the Chinese Comic Dialogues. Later, the emphasis on translation of verbal humor on literature and sitcom comes to pass. For example, from the perspective of Functionalism, Dai Jing [11] tries to prove Functionalism is powerful in accounting for humorous utterance translation, believing that not only is humorous utterance translation "loyal" to the source language but also it should vary according to the readers' acceptance in the target language. From the perspective of inference and blending, Li Ru and Liu Zhuyan [12] explores certain process of verbal humor effects by analyses on verbal humor translation. When it comes to sitcom, Wang Shuo and Cui Yanhui [13] analyze verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory* from presupposition perspective, in which case the conclusion could be drawn that verbal humor could be produced via the violation of appropriateness and mutual knowledge, as well as the harness of defeasibility of presupposition.

3. Methodology

The methodology of this paper would be manifested in this part, encompassing the research questions, object and method.

3.1. Research Questions

This paper intends to deal with the following research questions:

- 1) How could verbal humor be triggered by Cooperative Principle and its maxims?
- 2) What are the most frequent maxim and the least frequent maxim among four maxims?

3.2. Research Object

The paper tries to plumb verbal humor in *Two and a Half Men* from the pragmatic perspective, Cooperative Principle. The research object is 217 conversations selected randomly from the sitcom *Two and a Half Men*.

3.3. Research Method

The qualitative analysis is employed to classify those conversations into different kinds based on the Cooperative Principle. In doing so, the conversations flouting the same maxim could be analyzed together to figure out the way to trigger verbal humor. Besides, by dint of quantitative

analysis, the number of verbal humor flouting by each maxim could be manifested directly. In doing so, the most frequent maxim and the least one could be demonstrated.

4. Verbal Humor Conveyed by Flouting Cooperative Principle

When the speaker doesn't adhere to the Cooperative Principle, conversational implicature is generated. In reality, people's utterance would sometimes violate the Cooperative Principle intentionally so as to gain a sense of humor. Under such circumstance can it be ascertained that the speaker does not express his opinion in a normal way, thus generating conversational implicature and leading the hearer to strive to conjecture what the speaker's implicit message is. On this account, humor generates presumably.

This part intends to deal with the first research question: How could verbal humor be triggered by Cooperative Principle and its maxims?

217 conversations in this sitcom provide apt illustrations for the study and the analysis process of 9 conversations are demonstrated in this part.

4.1. Verbal Humor Conveyed by Flouting the Quantity Maxim

According to Grice (1975), the quantity maxim requires the speaker provides appropriate information during the ongoing conversation. In other words, one should not offer more or insufficient information than is required. Nevertheless, it is on the cards that the speaker violates the quantity maxim and gives inappropriate information deliberately, for the special purpose of generating a sense of humor.

Example 1

Judith: Is that the girl in the picture?

Charlie: Rose? No, she does not have a tattoo on her butt. I am guessing.

(Season1, episode7)

This conversation comes to pass when Judith ask Charlie whether the girl in the picture is his girlfriend. Charlie wants to express, that girl, Rose has no bearing on him under guise of the utterance "I am guessing." Nonetheless, one cannot gain the idea where her tattoo lies merely through guess unless they are familiar. It flouts the quantity maxim and leaves the Judith to infer from the utterance the following implicature: Charlie is familiar with that girl. Here the utterance of bad liar Charlie brings laughter to audiences.

Example 2

Melissa: Shall we go try on the bed?

Alan: The bed? The bed with the sheets?

(Season 7, episode 4)

The conversation happens in the house which Alan professes belongs to him. Melissa says that she wants to have a rest on the new bed. But as a matter of fact, this is not Alan's house so he becomes nervous and utters "the bed with the sheets." His words provide more information because a bed must be together with sheets and it is not necessary to mention it. When Alan provides unnecessary information with tension, a sense of humor could be conveyed.

Example 3

Charlie: You drink milk?

Jake: Not that milk. That milk.

Charlie: What is the different?

Jake: That is Dairy Farm. We drink Dairy Barn.

(Season1, episode 1)

This conversation happens in the supermarket when Jake and Charlie are about to buy milk. Charlie asks Jack whether he would like to drink milk and picks up one kind of milk. Unexpectedly, Jack points out another milk called “Dairy Barn” followed by Charlie’s utterance that asking the difference. Jack’s answer “Dairy Barn” only give the name of the milk without telling Charlie the enough information about the exact distinction of the both. Under this circumstance, when the less information is given, humor could be conveyed sometimes.

4.2. Verbal Humor Conveyed by Flouting the Quality Maxim

The maxim of quality means the speaker should express what he believes to be true and what he says should not devoid of enough evidence. Otherwise, one could be recognized as violating the quality maxim. Nevertheless, in daily conversation, one would like to generate humor as well as capture a hilarious atmosphere by flouting this maxim.

Example 4

Mia: You know what Kandi is?

Charlie: I try not to judge.

Mia: She is a lifeboat. You are keeping a lifeboat for when this ship sinks.

(Season 3, episode 7)

This conversation happens between Charlie and his girlfriend, Mia. It is not true that one is a lifeboat. But here, after figuring out the fact that her boyfriend has affair with other girl, Mia says “she is a lifeboat” to tease him. “This ship” refers to their relationship while “the ship sinks” resembles she breaks up with him. It turns out that if Mia broke up with Charlie, he would still have Kandi. Instead of expressing her idea directly, Mia leaves the implicit message by flouting the quality maxim.

Example 5

Alan: Mom, are you and he, um...?

Evelyn: Oh, good Lord, no. The man is one thousand years old.

Charlie: So he is just a friend.

(Season 7, episode 11)

On Christmas Eve, Evelyn and a senile man come to Charlie’s house. Alan asks his mother whether this man is her new boyfriend. Her utterance “the man is one thousand years” is undoubtedly not true because nobody can be alive for one thousand years, thus flouting the maxim of quality. Be that as it may, it is obviously a hyperbole and Evelyn employs hyperbole, for the purpose of emphasizing that this man is too old for her, giving an unexpected humorous feeling to audiences.

4.3. Verbal Humor Conveyed by Flouting the Relation Maxim

The relation maxim requires the speaker’s utterance related to the ongoing topic during the conversation. However, it is on the cards that in reality, people would like to get rid of pertinent information and related subject for special purpose, thus producing humorous effect. Two ways to violate the relation maxim would be manifested in the following examples, namely, the unconnected information and the shift of topic.

Example 6

Charlie: Here is one of the first things your Uncle Charlie wrote. Huh? Teenage Mutnat Ninja. What do you think?

Jake: Must have been before my time.

Charlie: Okay, we are done here.

(Season1, episode 2)

When Charlie is playing the piano to demonstrate his play and asking Jake's opinion about it, Jake does not answer in a normal way. Instead, his attitude towards this question is totally unrelated to the play itself. By saying "must have been before my time", it could be seen that Jake does not lose his heart to this play. The unrelated answer flouts the relation maxim, leading to the humor.

Example 7

Alan: She just throws me out. What was the point of our wedding vows?

Charlie: How did you get in my house?

(Season 1, episode 1)

After Judith gets divorce with Alan, he is griping about their marriage. Under such circumstance, as his brother, Charlie is supposed to console him and perk him up. Be that as it may, all Charlie focuses on is how Alan comes in his house so he changes the topic and asks the question that he really concerns. The shift of topic and unrelated answer produce humor among audiences.

4.4. Verbal Humor Conveyed by Flouting the Manner Maxim

The maxim of manner requires participants to express his utterance briefly, clearly and orderly, shunning ambiguousness and obscurity. Provided that one's utterance flouts the manner maxim, hearer may become puzzled about what he expresses. Be that as it may, in people's daily communication, with the purpose of expressing some forbidden words or blue mood, one would flout the manner maxim intentionally. Subsequently, a sense of humor may come to pass.

Example 8

Alan: Both hands: ten and two.

Jack: Twelve.

Alan: No, no, like a clock. 10:00 and 2:00.

(Season 7, episode 5)

When Jack is driving, he wants to much cooler so he drives the car with one hand on the steering wheel. Alan manages to correct this bad driving habit and say "ten and two" meaning putting both his hands on the ten and two o'clock in the steering wheel. However, Jack mistakes his words "ten and two" as counting the number and answers "twelve". Here the answer doesn't shun ambiguousness but verbal humor could be triggered by this answer.

Example 9

Evelyn: You are looking very well and slimming down nicely.

Judith: Thanks. I recently dropped 160 pounds.

(Season 1, episode 23)

This conversation comes to pass when Judith just gets divorced. Evelyn, Alan's mother, acclaims Judith that she slims down nicely, followed by Judith's answer "I dropped 160 pounds" which could be labeled as a euphemism for Alan, because 160 pounds is the exact weight of Alan and she just gets divorces with Alan. Instead of pointing out Alan directly, 160 pounds flouts the manner maxim but audiences would feel hilarious after thinking twice.

5. Result and Discussion

Through the analysis of the above examples from the sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, the understanding comes that sometimes both the speaker and the hearer need to employ meticulous meditation in order to figure out the implicit messages.

The author picks up 217 conversations to figure out the frequency of each maxim, trying to deal with the second research question: What are the most frequent maxim and the least frequent maxim among four maxims?

Through the quantitative analysis, Table 6 reveals the frequency of verbal humor triggered by flouting each maxim. Among 217 conversations, 63 conversations flout the quantity maxim accounting for 29.0%; 82 conversations flout the quality maxim accounting for 37.8%; 41 conversations flout the relation maxim accounting for 18.9%; 31 conversations flout the manner maxim accounting for 14.3%. Therefore, the quality maxim is the most frequent maxim whereas the manner maxim is the least frequent maxim.

Table 6. Number Flouting Each Maxim

Maxim	Quantity	Quality	Relation	Manner	Total
Number	63	82	41	31	217
Percentage	29.0%	37.8%	18.9%	14.3%	100%

6. Conclusion

In the real conversation, one could violate a certain maxim intentionally, for the purpose of averting embarrassment, blue mood and forbidden words, even yielding humorous effect sometimes.

On the basis of the analysis of verbal humor from the American sitcom *Two and a Half Men*, this paper picks up 9 examples to manifest how verbal humor could be achieved by flouting the Cooperative Principle and its sub-maxims. Through the data collection of 217 conversations, it could be seen that among those maxims, the maxim of quality is flouted frequently while the maxim of manner is the least one.

The limitations of the thesis are follows. On the one hand, this thesis analyzes verbal humor merely from pragmatics perspective, namely, the Cooperative Principle, ignoring other relevant theories. On the other hand, all the examples are selected by the author, which is unavoidably subjective.

References

- [1] Grice, H. P. : *Syntax and Semantics* (Academic Press, America 1975).
- [2] Nash, W.: *The Language of Humor* (Longman Group Limited, America 1985).
- [3] Lorenz, K. : *On Aggression* (Routledge Press, London; New York 1996).
- [4] Holmes, J. : *Sharing a Laugh: Pragmatic Aspects of Humor and Gender in the Workplace*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 38 (2005), p. 26-50.
- [5] T. G. Wu: *Phonetic Elements and Humorous Speech*, *Language and Translation(Chinese)*, Vol.64 (2000), No.4, p. 23-26.
- [6] X. Y. Li: *A Study of Japanese Verbal Humor in Yoshimoto Shinkigeki from the Perspective of Relevance Theory*, *Journal of Educational Institute of Jilin Province*, Vol. 33 (2017), No. 3, p. 163-165.
- [7] Y. Yu: *On the Relationship between Cooperative Principle and Humor Speech*, *Journal of Hubei University of Science and Technology*, Vol. 22 (2001), No.1, p.84-85.
- [8] N. S. Liu, X. L. Xiong: *On Fce-saving Functions of Verbal Humor*, *Foreign Language Education*, Vol.5(2003), No.6, p. 10-13.
- [9] W. Z. Wang: *A Pragmatic Approach to the Understanding of Verbal Humor*(MS, Anhui University, China 2005).
- [10] J. Li: *Memetics and Verbal Humor*, *Foreign Language Research*, Vol. 11(2008), No. 1, p. 74-78.

- [11] J. Dai: Explanation of Humorous Utterance Translation from the Perspective of Functionalism—A Case Study of YANG Bi's Translation of Vanity Fair, *Journal of Jining University*, Vol.35 (2014), No. 6, p. 107-109+114.
- [12] R. Li, Z. Y. Liu : Verbal Humor Translation in "Friends" from the Perspective of Inference and Blending, *Journal of Baoshan University*, Vol. 29 (2010), No. 4, p. 80-84.
- [13] S. Wang, Y. H. Cui: The Production of Verbal Humor from the Perspective of Pragmatic Presupposition—Taking the th Season of the Big Bang Theory as an Example, *Journal of Dalian Minzu University*, Vol. 21 (2019), No. 21, p. 366-368.