An Analysis of the Verbal Humor in Situation Comedy Two Broke Girls from the Violation of Cooperative Principle

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Abstract. For recent years, many scholars analyze English situation comedy from the aspects of sociology, literature, art, music, translation and so on. Analysis of situation comedy from the perspective of linguistics may help audience appreciate situation comedy through a more scientific and reasonable view, and it may also help audience and English learners better understand situation comedy. This paper tries to use Grice’s cooperative principle with its quantity maxim, quality maxim, manner maxim and relation maxim to analyze how the humor comes into being in American situation comedy Two Broke Girls. This paper aims at giving a better understanding of humor and helping audience to enjoy and realize situation comedy from a linguistic view.

Introduction

The situation comedy Two Broke Girls is shown on the CBS of America since September 19th, 2011. It is a very popular comedy and it won the honor of the most popular new situation comedy on the 38th People Election Award of America. The story took place in New York and it tells the interesting life of two waitresses, Max Black and Caroline Channing, who want to have a successful business by making and selling hand-made cake. This thesis intends to analyze the formation of the verbal humor in Two Broke Girls by a linguistic way. The analysis based on a pragmatic theory: Cooperative Principle. This paper intends to solve the problem that how the verbal humor is created through violating the cooperative principle’s four maxims and how to appreciate situation comedy from the a linguistic view. This paper can help audience understand the verbal humor in foreign situation comedy, and they can realize the implicature of characters’ conversation clearly.

In this thesis, firstly, the situation of the relative research will be introduced, then the cooperative principle and its maxims will be introduced in the part Theoretical Basis. Then in Discussion, some cases in Two Broke Girls will be analyzed one by one. The Discussion is the main part of this thesis, it will analyze the verbal humor created by violating the cooperative principle. The last part is a conclusion, which summarizes the whole paper. It gives the new finding and points out the limitation of present research, and it also offers some suggestions.

Literature Review

Humor has been a heated subject for scholars and researchers from every fields since ancient time. There were many distinguished theorists of humor, such as Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. In the 20th century, the theories of humor continued to develop and great achievements have been made.

Definition of Humor

Humor is explained as the ability or tendency to think that things are funny, or funny things you say that show you have this ability [1]. What's more, the quality in something that makes it funny and makes people laugh in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English on line. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines humor as: (1) the quality in something that makes it funny or amusing; the ability to laugh at things that are amusing; (2) the state of your feelings or mind at a particular time; (3) one of the four liquids that were thought in the past to be in a person's body and
to influence healthy and character [2].

Scholars categorize humor into different classifications. Since this thesis focuses on the humor in situation comedy, a simple approach is chosen: One is nonverbal humor which refers to a humorous situation, the other is verbal humor which refers to humor conveyed or expressed by means of a linguistic system [3]. In the situation comedy, not only surprising plots create the humorous effect, but also the role of humorous dialogues between characters can give audience fun.

General Review of Humor

There are three basic conventional theories in humor study: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory. Superiority Theory holds that humor is generated from making fun of others, and showing contempt for others misfortune and looking down upon others to satisfy superior feelings. The famous Ancient Greek philosopher Plato had his point of view that malice or envy is at the root of comic enjoyment and that we laugh at the misfortunes of others for joy that we do not share them [4]. In Plato's view, superiority can explain all kinds of humor.

Incongruity Theory argues that contradiction exists in various kinds of humor which is generated from the perception of complicated part that includes the abnormal, contradictory, unexpected or inconsistent relationship between elements of a matter, thinking, object or social desirability. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is typical representative in incongruity theory. From the perspective of relief theory, laughter is generated through relief from one's tension and suppression from all sides. The two most powerful relief theorists are Herbert Spencer and Sigmund Freud.

In the view of linguistics, Raskin’s Semantic Script Theory of Humor and Attardo and Raskin’s General Theory of Verbal Humor are the important theories for humor research from the angle of semantics. Raskin pointed out that words are script, and we use the panel point of vocabulary and the graph the semantic chain formed to state the concept of script. Semantic Script Theory of Humor thought that script opposite is one of the most important factors of language humor, but it ignored other factors which also have influence on language humor.

Study on Humor at Home

Chinese modern writer and linguist Lin Yutang who is treated as the master of humor is said to be the first to translate humor into Chinese. He believes that humor is indispensable in daily life. He says that the citizens without the moisturizing of humor, the culture must be hypocritical, the life must be full of cheat, the thought must be pedantry, and what's more the soul will be stubborn gradually [5]. Research on humor starts from 1980 in China, Hu Fanzhu, a famous linguistic scholar whose study is mainly on rhetoric and sociolinguistics, published Linguistics of Humor the book is considered as the first to systematically describe verbal humor which affects the following scholars from the various perspectives such as linguistics, pragmatics, and rhetoric, etc [6].

Some Chinese scholars study humor from a pragmatic approach, pragmatics as the study of language in use study how language is used through interaction, the basic theories such as cooperative principle, the speech acts, and presupposition are the theoretical framework of utterance analysis. Xu Shenghuan puts forward bridging inference and inference to stereotype as a development of implicature theory [7]. He explains the difference between humor and communication.

Theoretical Basis

This thesis will analyze the cases under the cooperative principle theory, which is an important theory in pragmatics. Pragmatics studies the conversations in daily life, and Two Broke Girls is a story based on daily life, that is the reason why choose cooperative principle as the theoretical basis.

The Cooperative Principle and Its Maxims

The cooperative principle was firstly put forward by American philosopher Paul Grice in 1967. The cooperative principle can be comprehended as the following: Make your conversational 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 [8]. A successful conversation need the cooperation of both sides, and if they want to be understood by others, they should obey the rules. Grice separated the cooperative principle into four maxims: quality, quantity, relevance and manner.
These maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, and co-operative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly and clearly, while providing sufficient information [9].

The Violation of Cooperative Principle

Sometimes speakers may violate the cooperative principle deliberately, which aim at achieving some implicatures, and the humorous effect can be created from the implicature [10]. Grice thinks there are four kinds of violation: flouting, violating, infringing and opting out [11].

People violate the cooperative principle out of many reasons: maintaining interpersonal relationship, avoiding embarrassment, changing the topic or just aiming at making others laugh. The violation of cooperative principle and its maxims will be mainly discussed in the following analysis of cases.

Discussion on the Verbal Humor of Two Broke Girls

A Brief Introduction to Two Broke Girls

The situation comedy Two Broke Girls tells a story about two girls, Max and Caroline, who come from totally different family and have different education and friends, become very close friend and partners. Max is an poor but attractive girl with sharp words, and Caroline is a fashionable girl who ever grew up in a rich family but faces low level workplace and has to earn money by herself. They become roommates accidentally, and work together at a little restaurant. But they dream to have their own successful business by selling hand-make cake, and make plan and effort to achieve the goal.

Humor Created by Violating the Cooperative Principle

This part will analyze the humor in Two Broke Girls in the perspective of violating the cooperative principle. This violation does not fail at continuing the conversation, and it also make the communication humorous and meaningful.

Violating Maxim of Quality

This maxim requires speakers to say the things that they believe are in truth. Speakers should not violate the principle by lying or saying something not real. However, in actual communication, people say some false things to cover their true feelings, and some of them aim at achieving politeness or creating the effect of irony, metaphor, and hyperbole.

Example 1

The cashier Earl has a sudden heart attack when they were about to close the Cafe at night. Max and Caroline send him to the hospital. Max worries about Earl’s condition, and she has a conversation with the receptionist of the hospital.

Max: I wanna go back there and see for myself.
Receptionist: Family members only.
Max: Well, I'm his daughter.
Receptionist: Oh, really? It says here he's 75 years old.
Max: Well, he started late.
Receptionist: And African American.
Max: He started late with a honkey. I'm one of those combo babies. Here, you need proof? My last name is Black. See, Max Black. He is black. I am Black. It'd be dumb if we weren't related. (season 1 episode 16)

Max wants to enter into the sickroom to see Earl, but she is told that only family members of Earl can enter to the sickroom. Max violates the maxim of quality at the first time and says she is the daughter of Earl. She is suspected because Earl is a black man while Max is a white girl. Then Max violates this maxim again and says that she is the child of Earl and a white woman. Max knows her words lack of evidence and she shows her ID card to the hearer that her family name is Black, and
intends to prove that she is really the daughter of Earl. This is obviously a violation of the maxim of quality, and Max knows what she says is not true, which makes audience feel humorous.

Example 2

Max and Caroline’s business of cupcake falls into a depression and they have different ideas about the methods of making and selling. One day they argue with each other:

Max: Remember when i said we should stop making all these flowery cupcakes and just make ones that say mean things, like Eat it or lick me?
Caroline: Your big business plan is cupcakes that say eat it or lick me?
Max: And other funny things like loser or Eat your feelings.
Caroline: Humm, Why not just shoot people in the face when they come to the window?  (season 4, episode 5)

Max thinks that they should put some mischievous words on the cupcakes and make it distinctive, but this new idea is not accepted by Caroline, who thinks those words ridicule customers and that will make customers disgusted. And Caroline violates the maxim of quality and says Why not just shoot people in the face when they come to the window, which is absolutely an false information. Caroline knows it is impossible to shoot customers, but she wants to use a hyperbole to satirize Max’s ideas. This violation makes their argument sharp but humorous.

Violating Maxim of Quantity

This maxim requires people to provide right amount information when raise or answer questions in conversation. In many cases, the humorous effect can be created by violating this maxim. It can be seen from two aspects: provide less information and provide more information.

1) Provide less information
Example 3:
Max: Earl, I have something new I want you to try.
Earl: That’s the exact same sentence that got me hooked on cocaine in the ’80s.
Max: It’s my new cupcake flavor. Delicious dark chocolate the ladies can’t help but love. I’m calling it” The Earl”. (season 1, episode 2)

In this episode, Max made a new kind of cupcake, and she invited the old black cashier, Earl, to taste the cake. But she did not provide enough information when speak to Earl, and she said “something new” instead of “new cupcake”. Earl did not get enough information from Max, then he bantered himself by talking cocaine deliberately. That is the humor created by providing less information. And then Max made an explanation and expressed her appreciation for old Earl, which is a very warm scene.

2) Provide more information
Example 4
Caroline: Actually, we wanted to see if you’d be interested in selling one of our fabulous graphic t-shirts.
Seller: Oh, n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n-n... All sorts of “no”, okay? As much as I love a fez, a caftan, and a teenage boy, this isn’t Morocco.
Max: That is really a long and boring version of “no”. (season 2 episode 4)

In this conversation, Caroline and Max are selling the T-shirts made by themselves, and when Caroline asks the seller if she wants to buy the T-shirt, the seller answers in a very long sentence instead of a simple “Yes” or “No”, which obviously violates the maxim of quantity, and the seller provides excessive information than she is supposed to. It also shows that the seller is totally not interested in Max’s T-shirts, which is totally different with her attitude in the later story. The humor is created by the seller’s violation of cooperative principle.

Violating Maxim of Relevance

The maxim of relevance requires what the speaker says should be relevant to the discussed topic, so that a conversation could carry out[12]. If the speaker say something that is not related to the topic, he or she is regarded as uncooperative and he or she violates the maxim of relevance. In some cases, this uncooperative words can create the humor. The following cases will be analyzed from this perspective.
Example 5
Max: Hold up. You know the names of your teeth?
Caroline: Don’t you?
Max: I don’t even know the name of my father. (season 1, episode 4)
In order to take care of teeth, Caroline numbers her teeth, which surprises Max, and Caroline also
feels surprised that Max does not know the name of her teeth. And Max answers that “I don’t even
know the name of my father”, which has nothing to do with the affair of teeth, so she violates the
maxim of relevance. However, obviously Max is implying that she even does not know the name of
her father, it is impossible for her to know the name of her teeth. Although Max is uncooperative in
this conversation, we can understand the implication of her words, and the humorous effect is
created.
Example 6
Caroline: Earl, guess what Max and I did.
Earl: I know what you didn’t do. Clean this dessert carousel. There is a Napoleon in here since
Napoleon.
Caroline: We rented our apartment on airbnb. (season 1, episode 8)
In this conversation, Caroline lets Earl to guess what Max and she did, but what Earl answers is
what they did not do, which obviously violates the maxim of relevance, and there is no relation
between Caroline’s question and his answer. However, this violation implies that Max and Caroline
are not qualified waitresses, which creates the humorous effect. And the sentence “There is a
Napoleon in here since Napoleon” can also be regarded as a violation of the maxim of quality,
which shows the humor of Earl.

Violating Maxim of Manner

This maxim requires people to obey the way they talk, and speakers should avoid misleading or
ambiguity and communicate with logic. Besides the violation in ordinary way, there are some
violations can create humorous effect.
Example 7
Caroline: Sophie you rent a town car?
Sophie: Yes, but only when it’s raining, Because, you know, I got hair extensions and nail
extensions, and you know I...I’m too extended to walk. (season 1, episode 16)
Sophie is a regular customer of the Cafe, and she is also a friend of Max and Caroline. In fact,
she is a fat woman. Therefore, when Caroline talks about the town car, Sophie explains that she is
“too extended to walk”. She uses “extension” and “too extended” instead of “fat”, which violates
the maxim of manner and makes the information ambiguous. But it is a expression of euphemism,
which can be understood by audience, and the humor is created by this expression.
Example 8
Caroline was in a rich family before. One day she goes back to old house to get some clothes, and
Max goes together with her.
Max: What? No way. No way. Is this Narnia? I’m about to say something I swore I’d never say”
O.M.G. Again...O.M. G.”It’s lame, but nothing else really nails it. This is the room that O.M.G was
born for.
Caroline: Max, it’s just my closet. (season 1, episode 5)
Max is a poor girl, and she never saw a closet like Caroline’s, and she says “O.M.G” instead of
“Oh, my God”, which creates the ambiguity and violates the maxim of manner. However, the
expression of Max shows her amazed feeling properly, and she says “O.M.G” for three times, which
also can be seen as a violation of the maxim of quantity. The contrast of Max’s expression and
Caroline’s reflection creates the humorous effect.
Summary

This thesis tries to analyze verbal humor in the situation comedy Two Broke Girls by cooperative principle. It shows that verbal humor could be achieved by violation of the cooperative principle, after analysis of the examples of verbal humor in the situation comedy, we can find that violating cooperative principle can be seen as an approach of verbal humor.

The thesis reviews the previous study of cooperative principle and humor. There is a closed relationship between cooperative principle and humor. From the perspective of cooperative principle, a discussion about the verbal humor in Two Broke Girls is made. Quantitative analysis is used to collect the corpus, after the analysis, a statistics has come out that a large part of the humorous language are generated from the theory of cooperative principle, and most of the verbal humor in this situation is achieved by violating the maxims of the cooperative principle. It proves that there are close relationship between verbal humor and cooperative principle. Quality analysis is used to collect the items from the principle and its maxims, the thesis gives an introduction to the four maxims of cooperative principle, in which the maxim of quantity more often violated to cause humorous effect. The selected examples proves that, the speakers convey their implied meaning or violate the maxims purposely or unintentionally in order to make fun of others in their dialogues. Violation of the cooperative principle is one of the reasons for the popularity of the situation comedy.

Humor in the situation comedy is an area worth of further study. This thesis only makes an attempt in humor study and language, and it only takes the cooperative principle as the theoretical frame, there are still some important theories which can be taken into consideration, such as politeness principle and speech act. Besides the linguistic factors, when studied the humor of foreign situation comedy, some other factors such as cultural difference also should be taken into consideration. These studies can help audience understand the humor from different culture.

References