

Analysis of Conversational Implicature in *The Big Bang Theory* From the Perspective of Cooperation Principle

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In 1967, Grice first proposed the cooperation principle (CP). He believed that people tend to conceal their words rather than express their ideas directly in daily communication, thus giving rise to conversational implicature. The goal of this topic is to analyse the humorous dialogue of *The Big Bang Theory* from the perspective of violating the cooperation principle so that readers can better understand their conversational implicature. After finishing the analysis of conversational implicature in *The Big Bang Theory*, the author finds that speakers often use sarcasm, hyperbole, metaphor, and other rhetorical devices to implicitly express their real intention in the process of communication, thus violating the cooperation principle and producing conversational implicature. The research value of this paper lies in helping people have a better understanding of the speaker's intention in daily communication and improve their enthusiasm in English learning.

Keywords: conversational implicature, CP principle, violation

Introduction

In 1975, it was the first time for Grice to propose the technical article “implicature”. Implicature is used to describe indirect meaning or implicit meaning instead of standard meaning. In the previous time, so many people have written the thesis on analysis of the conversational implicature in some literature, poets, and novels from the view of CP, for example, conversational implicature analysis in *A Dream in the Red Mansion*. However, studies in sitcoms and comedies are not enough.

In this paper, the author will pay more attention to the sitcom. *The Big Bang Theory* is a famous American situation comedy, which reflects the life and character of American people. Therefore, the analysis of conversational implicature in *The Big Bang Theory* through the perspective of cooperation principle is contribute to improving the comprehension of the American culture. In addition, it will help the speaker have a better understanding of conversational cooperation principle, thus improving their communication skills and have a successful conversation in their daily life. Furthermore, it also can arouse the interest of the English learning for the English learner. Through the research, the author finds that the communicators do violate the CP on purpose for kinds of reasons; thus, the conversational implicature will be generated.

Literature Review

First of all, it is the researches at abroad. In 1987, the scholars of the instruction field, Mercer and Edwards, published the book of *Common Knowledge: The Development of Understanding in the Classroom*, which was

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the first time for them to apply the conversational implicature theory into their researches on classroom conversations. In addition, some scholars are working with cross-culture communication, grammar research, and children's comprehension of rules from the perspective of cooperation principle and conversational implicature. Secondly, since 1980 years, scholars at home have begun to study conversational implicature from different aspects, such as the analysis of the theory of conversational implicature and it in movies and novels. The researches on conversational implicature can be divided into different stages. At the beginning, the scholars focus on to introduce the cooperative principle of Grice, and Cheng Yumin is the first man to introduce the CP of Grice systematically and comprehensively in his article "Grice's Conversational Implicature and Related Discussion" (Cheng, 1983, pp. 19-25). Afterwards, Chen Rong introduces the production and characteristics of conversational implicature. From that moment on, the researches on conversational implicature have brought great attention among scholars. In next stage, scholars pay more attention to the different genre of the text, that is literature aspect, for example, *An Analysis of Conversational Implicature in Little Woman From the Perspective of Cooperation Principle* (Song, 2017), *The Study of Conversational Implicature in Drama Thunderstorm From the View of Cooperation Principle* (Ye, 2016). Reviewing the research form of aboard and home, the author finds that the scholars put concentrations on theoretical study of CP or use simplex language form to research the conversational implicature but less analysis in sitcoms; thus, there are still some lacks in these studies, such as single research angle and unbalanced research level. Therefore, the author chooses a well-known American sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* as corpus to analyse the conversational implicature in it.

Elaboration of CP

In Grice's opinion, to reach a common goal in daily communication, the participants firstly are likely to cooperate; if not, it would be impossible for them to go on this conversation. This ordinary principle is recognized as Cooperation Principle, which is also called CP.

Cooperation Principle and Conversational Implicature

As we all know, in our daily life, we need to communicate with other people and conversation is vital to attain and convey information. In a conversation, in order to communication smoothly, people tend to observe some mechanisms. However, it is not difficult to find that quite often a speaker can mean more than what is said and the hearer can realize the speaker's meaning. Grice firmly believed that there must be some principles regulating the generation and comprehension. He named it Cooperation Principle. In his original wording, it goes as follows: "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" (Grice, 1975, p. 45).

In fact, it is composed of four basic maxims. The detailed maxims of CP will be introduced as follows:

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.

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.

Relation:

Be relevant.

Manner:

Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief.

4. Be orderly (Grice, 1975, pp. 45-46).

It can be understood as the maxim of quantity requires the speakers to product enough information, no less, no more; the quality maxim asks for true information; the maxim of relation demands the communicators to provide relevant information; the maxim of manner requires each participants to supply brief and clear information. However, we should notice that the use of term “maxim” does not mean that each speaker will obey the principle always. In some particular cases, people will tell lies on purpose. That is to say, people do violate the cooperation principle. And the conversational implicature is generated due to the violation of these maxims.

The Nonobservance of Cooperative Principle

As we all know that Grice has made complement descriptions about the conversational implicature produced by violating the CP, however, he does not give a full explanation about the implied meanings or the indirect expressions generated by observing the CP. As for the later question, Levinson, a linguist of Post-Gricean Developments, has given some interpretations. He explained “these inferences come about in at least two distinct ways, depending on the relation that the speaker is taken to have towards the maxims” (Levinson, 2001, p. 104). Try to think about the following conversation:

Obviously, if the speaker flouts or violates the CP, the conversational implicature will be generated. Consider the following example:

A (a neighbor): Where is your mother?

B (a kid): She’s either in her room or in the market.

In this case, the neighbor wants to know where the kid’s mother is, but the kid does not tell the place, and he makes some guesses. In fact, the kid violates the manner maxim of the CP, and the neighbor will infer that he does not exactly know where his mother is. Thus, the implicature is generated.

Conversational Implicature Produced by Flouting the Cooperative Principle in *The Big Bang Theory*

Violate the Maxim of Quantity

If the communicators provide more or less information than what he (she) really wants to say in a conversation, the first or second maxim of quantity will be flouted.

Setting: Howard is try to flirt with Penny, and he says Penny is a “doable” girl, which makes Penny freaking out. Therefore, Penny abuses Howard a creepy and pathetic guy and will die alone, which hurts Howard’s feelings, and he is not come out of his house. Thus, Leonard wants Penny to make an apologize to Howard due to that they need him for a robot battle. Before that, Leonard is prepared to give some hints about Howard’s mother for Penny.

Penny: Fine, I’ll go over there tomorrow.

Leonard: I should probably give you a heads up about his mother.

Penny: What about her?

Leonard: She's delightful woman. You'll love her.

(Season 2: Episode 12)

In this conversation, Leonard tells Penny that he will give her some heads up about Howard's mother; however, when Penny asks the detail thing, Leonard just says his mother is a great woman and no more. Actually, he should say more about his mother, but he is not, which flouts the quantity maxim because he does not provide enough information as is required. The conversational implicature here indicates Leonard does not want to make Penny scared by Howard's mother; thus, he just says she is a nice person.

Setting: Raj is about to make an important scientific discovery, and Howard and Bernadette are also there. Raj does still not talk to woman, which makes Howard annoyed, so Howard tells his girlfriend to open up a bottle of wine; otherwise, he is gonna end up with swimmer's ear. Unfortunately, Raj is kind of drunk.

Raj: Hello! Hawaii. This is Dr. Koothrappali in Pasadena. I'd like you to reposition the telescope, please. Scarlett Johansson's house! I'm kidding, Hawaii. Mahalo. Whoo!

Howard: It might have been a mistake to open that second bottle of wine.

Bernadette: Well, live and learn. So, Raj, do you think this planet you're looking for could have an atmosphere that supports life?

Raj: Maybe. If it did, I'd be famous. I'd be on the cover of magazines. And then, instead of living alone in my tiny apartment, I'd have a big mansion.

Bernadette: That sounds great.

Raj: It is. If you like wandering around a big, empty house, with no one to love you.

(Season 4: Episode 9)

In this conversation, Bernadette asks Raj a question. This is about his opinion about if the planet that he is looking for could have an atmosphere that supports life. At the beginning, Raj says "Maybe". But, if Raj observes the quantity maxim, he should not say anything anymore; however, he begins to say that he will have a big mansion and be famous if he makes it. Then Bernadette says it will be great. And Raj says yes; however, he still keeps talking, because he thinks no one to love him. Raj is keeping flouting the quantity maxim; he provides more information which is unnecessary for this communication. The conversational implicature here indicates Raj is too drunk to self-pitied, which makes his friends, Howard and Bernadette, feel very awkward and embarrassed.

Violate the Maxim of Quality

Sometimes the speakers maybe use rhetorical devices in their conversations, such as irony, hyperbole, metaphor, and rhetorical question to say something that they think is not true or just say that they lack of evidence, and the quality maxim will be violated; thus, the conversational implicature will be generated. The author will give two examples as follows:

Setting: Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj are making an experiment. They try to control their stereo by sending a signal around the world via the internet. They really make it. However, the voice is so loud disturbing their neighbor, Penny. Then she knocks their door, requiring them to turn the stereo down.

Howard: Are we ready on the stereo?

Raj: Go for stereo.

(The music rings, and the voice is too loud.)

Penny: Hey, guys.

Sheldon: Hello!

Howard: Hello!

Penny: It's a little loud.

Howard: No problem—turning it down. San Francisco, Lisbon, Halifax...And Voila.

Penny: Okay, thanks.

Leonard: Hang on, hang on. Do you not realize what we just did?

Penny: Yeah, you turned your stereo down with your laptop.

Sheldon: No, we turned our stereo down by sending a signal around the world via the internet.

Penny: You know, you can just get one of those universal remotes. At radio shack, they're really cheap.

Leonard: No, no. You don't get it. Howard, enable public access.

Howard: Public access enabled.

(A few seconds later, the lamp still not light up.)

Penny: Boy, that's terrific. I'll see ya.

Leonard: Hang on, hang on. See?

Penny: No.

Sheldon: Someone in Szechwan Province, China is using his computer to turn our lights on and off.

Penny: Well, that's handy.

(Season 1: Episode 9)

Leonard is keep trying to explain what they just did for Penny. But she does not have any interest in it. Therefore, when Leonard asks if she can see it, she immediately says no, which she actually sees. And then, Sheldon tells Penny some guy, who is from Sichuan Province of China, is controlling their lights. Penny answers ironically, "Well, that's handy". Obviously, Penny violates the quality maxim; she tells lies. The conversational implicature here shows that in Penny's eyes, what Leonard's guys did is just so boring and ridiculous, and she totally has any idea about what they did.

Violate the Maxim of Relation

Sometimes, the speaker will say something that is unrelated to the current topic; thus, the relation maxim will be flouted and the conversational implicature will be produced.

Setting: Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Raj are sitting in the Chess Factory (a restaurant), and Penny is waiting the four guys to order something. At that time, Leslie comes over here and she says "Hello" to Leonard. When Leslie left, Penny told Leonard they two guys can make a good couple. And Leonard is keep thinking Penny's words when he comes back home with Sheldon.

Leonard: If Penny didn't know that Leslie had turned me down, then it would unambiguously mean, that she, Penny, thought I should ask her, Leslie, out, indicating that she, Penny, had no interest in me asking her, Penny, out. But, because she did know that I had asked Leslie out and that she, Leslie, had turned me down, then she, Penny, could be offering consolation.

Sheldon: You're lucky man, Leonard.

Leonard: How, so?

Sheldon: You're talking to one of the three men in the western hemisphere capable of following that train of thought.

(Season 1: Episode 5)

Leonard wants Sheldon to help him to analyse whether his opinions about Penny's words are correct or not; however, Sheldon just tells Leonard that how smart he is. What Sheldon said is unrelated to the current topic; thus, he violates the maxim of relation. The conversational implicature here indicates Sheldon does not care about Leonard's emotional life at all.

Setting: Sheldon invites Penny and Leonard to play games with him on the Sunday; however, Penny needs to pick up his ex-boyfriend, Justin, from the airport. And Leonard totally disagrees her ex-boyfriend could crush on her couch for a few weeks. Then they have a big fight. Sheldon dislikes fighting.

Leonard: I don't get how she can just announce that an old boyfriend is going to be sleeping on her couch.

Sheldon: Hey, I thought of a game we can play in the car.

Leonard: I don't want play a game, Sheldon.

Sheldon: It's called "scientists". Now, I will name three scientists, then you put them in order of the size of their contribution to their respective fields. To make this game even more compelling, you must consider only the contribution of the man to the field, not the validity of the field itself. For example, Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan made a greater contribution to the discredited field of alchemy than Halbert Vanderplatt made to neurobiology. Okay, ready to have some fun.

Leonard: An old boyfriend who's definitely not gay. That's what a guy likes to hear "definitely." That's what a guy likes to hear "definitely."

Sheldon: All right. I'll state with one easy. Um, Isaac Newton, Madame Curie and Niles Bohr.

Leonard: And then I say one little thing and I end up being the bad guy!

Sheldon: Hint: Madame Curie had her husband to help her.

Leonard: What am I supposed to say? "Sure, Penny, I'm cool with your old boyfriend sleeping in your apartment." "Well, Leonard, it doesn't matter if you're cool or not." "Because I'm Penny and I'm pretty and I can do whatever the hell I want." "Oh I get it! You think you've doing me a favor just by being a relationship with me." "No, no Leonard! I'm doing you a favor just by being in the same room as you."

Sheldon: Leonard! Stop the car!

Leonard: What?

Sheldon: I can't listen to the two of you fight any more.

(Season 3: Episode 7)

It is the conversation when Leonard drives Sheldon to work. First of all, Leonard says some bad thing about Penny. Sheldon cannot tolerate the two of them fight any more. So he proposed to play a car game. That's not gonna happen. Because Leonard is still madding at Penny, he thinks that allowing ex-boyfriend to sleep in her house is not a good idea. Thus, he keeps complaining Penny to Sheldon and just ignores what Sheldon is talking about, which makes Sheldon extremely angry; thus he requires to get off. Leonard and Sheldon are saying totally different things in the whole conversation. They do not cooperate with each other in this dialog, which flouts the relation maxim. In fact, the conversational implicature here indicates Sheldon wants to play a game with Leonard in order to divert his attention to the fighting thing and he really dislikes fighting, because it will remind of the fighting between his parents.

Violate the Maxim of Manner

The manner maxim requires the talker to say briefly, orderly, to avoid ambiguity and obscurity of expression; otherwise, the maxim will be flouted. The author will give four examples about that as follows:

Setting: Leonard has a great idea. He proposes to write a little app for scientists who will use the equation. And Sheldon, Howard, and Raj are agree to be part of Leonard's project. However, Sheldon is impossible to work with; thus, he is fired by Leonard. Sheldon is so sad that he decides to impede their progress, and one day, he begins to playing the Theremin when they are talking about the project problems. Unfortunately, Sheldon was kicked out of their apartment. Then he sits on the stair, keeping playing the Theremin disappointingly. And Penny comes back at that time.

Penny: Sheldon, I'm gonna make some cocoa. Do you want some?

Sheldon: Do you make it with milk or water?

Penny: Milk.

Sheldon: Real cocoa?

Penny: That's what it says on the packet.

Sheldon: Do you have those little marshmallows?

Penny: No, sorry.

Sheldon: Well, it's appropriate.

Penny: What does that mean?

Sheldon: A disappointing drink for a disappointing day.

(Season 4: Episode 12)

In order to obey the manner maxim, the speakers are required to speak briefly and in this dialog, Sheldon proposes several questions to Penny. In fact, his real purpose is to ask if Penny will make some cocoa that he wants. The three above questions are unnecessary and can be replaced by one sentence "Do you make the cocoa according to my requirements". All these redundant information highlights personality of Sheldon and produces the humorous effect. The prolixity voiced in this sample is against the manner maxim. Communicators should avoid use tedious information in order to talk smoothly.

Setting: Sheldon and Leonard are playing video games.

Leonard: Nice shoot.

Sheldon: Thank you. My father taught me archery as a child. It's odd how the activity brings back the smell of Kmart bourbon (a kind of wine).

Leonard: Perfect

Sheldon: I know. What an elf I would have made.

(Season 4: Episode 20)

Leonard thinks that Sheldon is really good at that game, so he praises him. Sheldon accepts Leonard's compliment, and then he tells Leonard that it was his father that taught him archery when he was a child. After that, Sheldon says that he smells the flavour of Kmart bourbon; in fact, he is missing his father. But he does not indicate his father was drinking, which violates the manner maxim. If Leonard does not know exactly about Sheldon's father, he will not know what Sheldon is talking about. Therefore, the speakers should make their opinions clearly in order to have a success conversation.

Conclusions

This still has a dramatic influence due to that the cooperation principle and conversational implicature are proposed by Grice. Especially, along with the society development, people are likelier to interact with other people. In most cases, people do flout the CP and its maxims on purpose, namely, they maybe tell a lie or offer

some information which they are not sure; therefore, the conversational implicature are generated and sometimes it can achieve some humorous effects. From the above analysis, the author draw the main findings as follows:

At the beginning, people most flouted maxim is the quality maxim in *The Big Bang Theory*; it has the best persuasion. Then, the quantity maxim is second violated, the third one is manner maxim, and the last one is relation maxim. In addition, the conversational implicature generated is flouting the quality maxim usually producing humorous effects. No matter who are they between the English learners and ordinary people, they will have a deep understanding of American social life and the cooperation principle and conversational implicature; thus whether their interest in English learning or their communication skills in daily life, they will get a great progress.

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