

# Analysis of English Humor in *Two Broke Girls* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle\*

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Humor, as a language art, is considered to be an indispensable form of communication in our daily life. This paper, from the perspective of cooperative principle, takes 8 humorous conversations from the popular sitcom *Two Broke Girls* as analytical materials to analyze English humor. The humorous effects produced by violating the maxim of quantity, quality, relation and manner in *Two Broke Girls* are the concrete embodiment of conversational implicature in English humor. The most important part of this paper is the detailed analyses of many examples, which is helpful to the study of the cultural differences between Chinese humor and English humor. Moreover, linking sitcoms to pragmatics can deepen interlocutors' understanding of cooperative principle and the speaker's implication. As an interdisciplinary subject, therefore, not only can pragmatics be combined with sitcoms, but also applies to other fields. It is hoped that this paper can make future researchers realize the importance of context and delve into other areas from the perspective of cooperative principle.

**Keywords:** humor, cooperative principle, conversational implicature, *Two Broke Girls*

## Introduction

Humor is a variation of language. Humor speech, under the guidance of cooperative principle and the violation of some principles of cooperative principle, produces "hidden meaning" that is also called conversational meaning and achieves humorous effects through the deduction of special conversational meaning by both parties. As an important bridge between linguistics and television, cooperative principle is gaining more and more schools' attention in the areas of film and television studies (Liu, 2012; Zhao & Wang, 2011; Zheng, 2012). This paper, from the perspective of pragmatics, adopts Grice's cooperative principle and the related theory as a theoretical framework, and then analyzes the humorous implication which is generated by two communicative sides that deliberately violate the cooperative principle of some criteria. It demonstrates the contextual factors that contribute to the humor of sitcoms. Humor is a foreign word, translated from English. It is a word translated in both pronunciation and meaning, and its expression is just right (Liu, 2015). Humorous language has numerous language expressions, mainly including jokes and cold jokes. Despite the different forms of humorous language, most of them are caused by violating the principle of cooperation (Song, 2016). The most important part of this paper is the detailed analyses of 8 examples in a famous American television *Two Broke*

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*Girls*, which are helpful to the study of cooperative principle. By analyzing English humor, it is better to understand the realization of humorous effects and enjoy the pleasure which is brought by short sentences. It can also help the audience to have a better understanding of the funny effects of the original work when they are watching sitcoms and to make good use of humor in their real life.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Pragmatics is the study of how speakers of a language use sentences to effect successful communication. It studies such topics as related to language communication, including speech acts, indirect language, conversation and cross-cultural communication (Dai, 2013). This paper will mainly introduce one of the most important theories in pragmatics, cooperative principle, and its related characteristics.

### 2.1. Cooperative Principle and Its Four Maxims

In Grice's view, people must cooperate with each other during a conversation. Otherwise, it is impossible to continue the conversation (Dai, 2013). This general principle is called the Cooperative Principle (CP). The definition of cooperative principle in Grice's words is: 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 (Hu, 2017).

To specify the CP further, Grice introduced four categories of maxims as follows. The first one is the maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange); do not make your contribution more informative than is required. The second one is the maxim of quality: try to make your contribution one that is true; do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. The third one is the maxim of relation: be relevant. Last one is the maxim of manner: avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief; be orderly (Dai, 2013).

In conclusion, when people are talking, these maxims existing in their minds are unintentionally applied. The speaker offers adequate, right and related information, and the hearer tries his best to make clear the speaker's implication.

### 2.2. Violation of the Maxims

Grice found that people usually do not observe the cooperative principle in daily conversations. They like to imply the real meaning by violating the maxims. Implicature is a component of speaker meaning that constitutes an aspect of what is meant in a speaker's utterance without being part of what is said. What a speaker intends to communicate is characteristically far richer than what she directly expresses (Horn & Ward, 2006). According to Grice's pragmatic thoughts, the generation of meaning is related to the violation of one or more of the principles of cooperation. That is to say, the generation of meaning needs to have similar conditions. Firstly, the listener must be able to detect that the speaker violates some rules. For example, the speaker lies while the listener does not notice (believes it is true). At this moment, it is impossible to produce meaning. Secondly, the listener needs to find that the speaker wants the listener to know he has violated some rules. When a speaker violates a maxim, his language becomes indirect.

### 2.3. Characteristics of Conversational Implicature

Grice (Hu, 2017) introduces four characteristics of conversational implicature: non-conventionality, cancellability, non-detachability and calculability. Conversational implicature is non-conventional. That is to say, conversational implicature is different from the conventional meaning of words or sentences. The difference between them lies in that conversational implicature is contextual dependence. However, the conventional meaning is arrived at by logical inference. The generation and understanding of meaning are inseparable from specific context conditions in our daily conversations, interviews, and other verbal communication. In a lot of discussions about conversational meaning, contextual dependence is not discussed separately. Because of its importance to the generation and understanding of meaning, contextual dependence is regarded as one of the features of conversational implicature. Context includes linguistic context and non-linguistic context. What we should pay attention to is contextual sentences, which will produce different conversational implicatures in different contexts.

Non-detachability of conversational implicature indicates that propositional information can have the same meaning in the same context. It does not change because of the form of the words or the difference of some words. For example, the two communicative sides know that “Bill is a miser.” Using any sentence (1) *Bill is generous (Irony)* or (2) *Bill often pays for his friends (Irony)* in this context to talk about Bill can imply the same information.

Calculability refers to the fact that the implied meaning of a discourse can be derived. It is based on the literal meaning of words or sentences, relevant background information and other contextual information. The same utterance in different contexts can generate different implications and different utterances may imply the same meaning in the same context. However, because conversational implicature is the non-literal information that the speaker implies, the conversational implicature in certain context is not produced casually. It is derived according to a certain context.

## 3. Analysis of English Humor in *Two Broke Girls*

As an American sitcom, *Two Broke Girls* mainly describes the unfortunate experiences of Max and Caroline. Both of them are financially poor, but they work hard to run a cupcake business in the Williamsburg area of New York. Max comes from a poor work-class family while Caroline was born rich but now is disgraced due to her father’s bankruptcy. At the surface level, the conversations between them are always funny and nonsense. However, at the deep level, their inner goodness can touch the heart of the audience. In the play, the two heroines’ entrepreneurial experiences are arduous and tortuous. Their bitterness and joy are impressive. This is why *Two Broken Girls* is not only considered as a sitcom, but also an inspirational drama (Peng, 2016).

### 3.1. Humor Generated by Violating the Maxim of Quantity

When communicating with others, speakers should provide sufficient information as is required for the conversation, neither too much nor too little, or they will flout the maxim of quantity. However, in our daily life, people always violate cooperative principle to express their implicatures. There are two strategies that are often used to generate the conversational implicature: more information and less information.

Example (1)

*Caroline: Oh, my god! Is he your father?*

*Max: Uh, yes, he is my father. And my mother is a piece of chalk.*

This example uses the first strategy: more information. In Example (1), Caroline asks Max whether the man at this shop is her father or not. The sentence “Yes, he is my father.” is enough to express her meaning, but she adds “And my mother is a piece of chalk,” which implies that he is not Max’s father. Obviously, the latter information is redundant. It is not necessary to explain. However, by adding it, people can understand the implicature and then humorous effects are achieved.

Example (2)

*Caroline: What did he say, that I came on to him?*

*Max: Him who?*

*Caroline: Nothing.*

The second strategy is applied to Example (2). In this dialogue, after finishing the job, Max goes back to the restaurant. Because she hears Caroline suffering from some unhappy things, she wants to comfort Caroline. But Caroline thinks Max is talking about her boyfriend, who says something rude to Caroline. Then Max asks Caroline who she is talking about. However, Caroline just answers “Nothing.” She provides less information than Max needs, making the latter feels confused, so the maxim of quantity is flouted. Caroline’s conversational implicature is that she does not want to explain whom she is being talked about.

### 3.2. Humor Generated by Violating the Maxim of Quality

Conversational implicature produced by flouting the maxim of quality is very common in our daily communication. It refers to that the information provided by the speaker is contrary to what he is really trying to convey, or he deliberately says something without reason or evidence, such as lies or figures of speech (Hu, 2017). The rhetorical figures are employed very often in our daily life, and they are vivid ways for speakers to express their implicit meanings.

Example (3)

*Caroline: Oh my god, Max. My childhood bank.*

*Max: You have a childhood bank? I did not even have a childhood.*

Caroline and Max are walking on the road. Suddenly, they see a bank and Caroline says this is her childhood bank. However, Max says she does not have a childhood, which is clearly not true. Here she violates the maxim of quality. From the program, we know that Max comes from a poor family. She does not even know who her father is, and her childhood is unhappy. Max’s answer is self-deprecating to show her humor.

Example (4)

*Earl: Max, we got big trouble from little China.*

*Han Lee: Hi, Max.*

*Max: Big trouble? There is nothing big about him. It looks like I won him in a bear claw machine.*

Example (4) takes place in diner. Earl tells Max that they get big trouble from Han Lee. However, when Max sees Han Lee, she does not think it is a big trouble and says Han Lee is a bear in a bear claw machine. It is known that Han Lee is a Chinese and he is a little short, so Max violates the maxim of quality by using metaphor. She implies that Han Lee is thin and small.

### 3.3. Humor Generated by Violating the Maxim of Relation

The maxim of relation means that both sides of the conversation start on the same topic and have the same intention to communicate. It is strictly prohibited to have any inconstancy between the foreword and afterword. But in the process of communication, the hearer always says something irrelevant to the speaker's need and misinterprets the speaker's intention by using the pragmatic skills deliberately.

Example (5)

*Caroline: Earl, guess what Max and I did?*

*Earl: I know what you did not do. Clean this dessert carousel.*

Example (5) takes place in diner. Caroline asks Earl to guess what Max and she did. However, Earl says "I know what you did not do," which obviously has nothing to do with the answer the speaker wants. But because of this violation, Earl implies that Caroline and Max are not qualified waiters.

### 3.4. Humor Generated by Violating the Maxim of Manner

The maxim of manner needs the speaker to avoid obscurity, avoid ambiguity, be brief, and be orderly when he is speaking. Violating the maxim of manner often means the speaker uses pun, prolix, and vague utterances, which causes ambiguity and produces humor.

Example (6)

*Caroline: I would like to explain my vision for our future by walking you through my vision board. It is a simple tool.*

*Max: You thin, white, and I am bored.*

Example (6) takes place in Max's home. Caroline tells Max that she has been making vision boards for years. What's more, she always achieves her goals. She advises Max to draw some pictures about her dream and write down some inspiring words on the board, which can inspire her to work hard for her dream. However, Max answers "I am bored." Because the pronunciation of "bored" is similar to "board," Max violates the maxim of manner. The implicature is that "I think it is boring, and I do not believe it can work."

Example (7)

*Caroline: At least just on the bike. You do not even have to go anywhere yet.*

*Max: What is this bar doing here? I have no use for a bar that cannot get me drunk.*

In Example (7), Caroline is teaching Max to ride a bike. When Max finally determines to ride the bike, she says "What is this bar doing here? I have no use for a bar that cannot get me drunk." In this conversation, "bar" means the handlebars of a bicycle. However, Max deliberately misinterprets it as a "pub." This ambiguous expression violates the maxim of manner. It also shows her cynical attitude and produces humorous effects.

Example (8)

*Bobby: Hey, I was, uh-I was just in the neighborhood and thought I would hop on two subways and a Citi Bike and came say hi.*

*Caroline: A Citi Bike? Oh, this city is flattered.*

Example (8) takes place at diner. Bobby and Caroline just fall in love with each other. Bobby wants to see Caroline, so he takes the subway and rides a bike to see her. When he sees Caroline at diner, he just needs to say "I miss you," which can clearly express his purpose to come here. However, he says "I was just in the

neighborhood and thought I would hop on two subways and a Citi Bike and came say hi.” It takes the hearer more efforts to infer the speaker’s implication, so he violates the maxim of manner.

### Conclusion

This paper analyzes English humorous effects of the conversations of an American sitcom, *Two Broke Girls*, to derive the conversational implicature from the context, and deepen the understanding of English humor behind the conversation. Cooperative principle is one of the most effective pragmatic principles to analyze English humor, and the humorous effects produced by violating the cooperative principle are the embodiment of conversational implicature in English humor. By analyzing the English humor, audience will have a better understanding of the realization of humorous effects and enjoy the pleasure which is brought by short sentences. In addition, relating sitcoms to pragmatics can deepen the understanding of cooperative principle and the speaker’s implication. Pragmatics besides is an interdisciplinary subject. Therefore, not only can pragmatics be combined with sitcoms, but also applies to other fields. It is hoped that this paper can make people realize the importance of context and delve into other fields from the perspective of cooperative principle.

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