

# An Analysis of Mark Twain's Humor in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

YU Chen

Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China

Mark Twain is a famous writer and orator in America. Being distinguished from many greatest American writers, Mark Twain is noted for his language. Humor and satire are the best generalizations of his writing style. He is superior to other contemporary writers in that he not only makes use of humorous language to create a ridiculous atmosphere, but also to raise the curtain over the darkness of American society. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of the most typical one that can show his unique language. The author makes a humorous effect through the application of exaggerated language, expands the effect through the explicit and implicit contrast of the discourse, and creates a humorous atmosphere through the use of vernacular and dialect. Based on the discussion of humor and its characteristics, this paper analyzes and arranges the humorous language of Mark Twain in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and then discusses how Mark Twain achieves the humorous effect by violating the Cooperative Principle, thus revealing the theme.

**Keywords:** Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, humor, the cooperative principle

## Introduction

Mark Twain is an American humorist, novelist and writer. As an outstanding representative of American realistic literature in the late 19th century, he wrote a large number of works throughout his life, including novels, plays, poetry and other kinds of works. When it comes to the contents of his writing, he criticized irrational practices and evil human nature, showing a strong sense of justice and concern for the ordinary people as a typesetter and sailor; as for style, humor and satire are the best generalizations. One of his representatives is *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

This novel tells the story between a white boy Huck and a black slave Jim. As the protagonist, Huck could not tolerate being beaten by his father; he escaped to an uninhabited island. There he met Jim who also ran away from his master. To help Jim escape the fate of being caught back again, they decided to raft down the Mississippi River to the abolition zone. Most of the plots in this work are funny in themselves, but underlying Mark Twain's humor is a dark recurrence of antebellum cruelty and injustice. It makes *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* a funny book with a serious message.

Up to now this novel has been studied by many scholars at home and abroad. Most of them have studied the translation, artistic characteristics, human image and language features of this work. However, as for humor,

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YU Chen, postgraduate, School of Foreign Languages, Wuhan University of Technology.

there is still a blank part in the systematic classification and analysis of its humorous language. By analyzing the humorous language of this novel, we can imagine a panorama of American society. Moreover, we can explore how Mark Twain uses language to achieve a classic work, thus encouraging people to concentrate more on the attractiveness of language itself. This paper first classifies the humor in this novel, and then through some examples, comprehensively and systematically analyzes the embodiment of Mark Twain's humor in this work from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle in linguistics.

## **I. Mark Twain's Humor in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***

### **2.1 Mark Twain's Humor**

Mark Twain's humor is dialect humor. He uses a variety of dialects that are coherent and consistent in depth. In *The adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, it is hard to find a word that does not fit the identity of Huck or Jim.

There are three features in Mark Twain's humor. Firstly, the humorous language in the work is mostly spoken language, close to the reader's life and easy to reach people, so as to maximize the humor effects. His humor also combines the authenticity of realistic expression and romantic expression. The natural scene on the Mississippi River and along the coast is wonderful and magnificent from the author's writing, while the description of urban and rural life along the coast is true and realistic. This wonderful integration is especially reflected in Huck's ideological struggle. The first-person narrative mode is also used in humorous language. Conveying humor from a child's mouth makes humor more ironically effective. The theory of racial discrimination cannot be convinced by children who have not been deeply involved in the world, which reflects the necessity and urgency of the abolition of the slavery system.

### **2.2 The Characteristics of Mark Twain's Humor**

Mark Twain is a famous U.S. ironist. His works are not only full of interest, but also have serious and profound ideological connotation, thus combining humor and irony together and forming a unique humorous and ironical style.

The first characteristic is that his funny is for serious purposes. Huck is a smart and brave white boy. In order to pursue a free life, he escaped to the Mississippi River, where he met Jim, a black slave. Jim was a hard-working and loyal slave, who fled from the host to escape the fate of being sold again by his master. Two people have gone through a variety of surprises. The novel exalted the boy's wisdom and kindness and condemned the inaccuracy of religion, while shaping the image of a slave with dignity.

The second characteristic is expanding humor with contrast. In the eyes of the little Huck, the river bank is a world full of racial discrimination, cruel, cold and strangeness, which makes people feel repressed. On the contrary, the raft on the river is Huck and Jim's sweet home. Obviously, the author makes a strong contrast between the cold riverside world, namely the real world and the warm raft.

The third characteristic is that the colloquial language of local features makes humor easy to understand. Mark Twain's flexible use of the dialects is unique. His words are concise and direct; the sentence structure is simple, even not conforming to the grammatical rules. His language belongs to the typical verbal language, which he uses to describe the daily life of the story character.

### 2.3 The Classification of Humor in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Humor has many kinds of classifications. They vary from place to place. In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain's humor could be classified into three kinds: the common humor, navigational humor and American humor.

#### 2.3.1 Common humor

The first type is common humor, which means anyone can understand its meaning without prior knowledge.

Example (1) "He said some of it, but the rest was out of pirate books and robber books, and every gang that was high-toned about it." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 31)

A group of children formed a gang of bandits, and had their own affidavits. The affidavit is usually used in a grand occasion but is now used by a group of children. It creates a humorous mood.

Example (2) "If I was one of them I would see a man in Jericho before I would drop my business and come to him for the rubbing of an old tin lamp." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 55)

There is no so-called monster in the world. But the children's world is different. What they can't explain is to be explained by monster. Huck thought of the monster as a human being. He thought it was boring to call the monster to run around, but it was better to do his own things like them.

#### 2.3.2 Navigational humor

The second type is navigational humor, which refers to interesting words spoken on the sea.

Example (3) "Here, I'll put a twenty dollar gold piece on this board, and you get it when it floats by." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 212)

Huck was trying to report Jim. But when someone checked, Huck concealed Jim and successfully convinced them that he had an infectious father on the raft. Not only did Jim escape from the fate of being caught back, but also got a twenty dollar. It reflects Huck's wisdom and kindness.

Example (4) "We said there wasn't no home like a raft, after all." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 168)

Huck and Jim were succeeding to escape the dangers. They returned back to the raft again. During their journey, they felt most comfortable on the raft. Now, they will begin their trip.

#### 2.3.3 American humor

The third type is American humor. It includes cold humor, advanced text humor, smart humor, goodwill irony, scale joke and black humor.

Example (5) "And he wouldn't mind it if we called him plain Bridgewater." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 256)

The impersonating Duke claimed to be the Duke of Bridgewater. The old man seemed to be inadvertent, and he became the Duke of Bilge-water. Because of two or three letters, "the Duke of Water under the Bridge" was read as "the Duke of Water in the Cabin"—the living water under the bridge is clear, but the water in the cabin is dirty and stinky. This kind of humor gives people pleasure and shows abandonment, which makes people suffer from subtle influence in humor. This is the model of Mark Twain's American humor.

Example (6) "Mighty soon we'll have the cave so cluttered up with women, and fellows waiting to be ransomed, that there won't be no place for the robbers." (Mark Twain, 1995, pp. 38-39)

It belongs to goodwill irony. Tom's companion questioned that there was no place where they stood after the cave was full. It's also a sign that children are innocent and cute. They have blind self-confidence. The questions they posed are unlikely to happen. For example, the people they robbed could fill the whole hole.

## II. Mark Twain's Humor from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle

### 3.1 The Introduction of the Cooperative Principle in Linguistics

The Cooperative Principle was proposed by the famous American language philosopher Grice. Grice believes that in the process of people's communication, both sides of the dialogue seem to follow a certain principle intentionally or unintentionally in order to cooperate effectively to complete the communicative task. To specify the CP further, Grice introduced four categories of maxims as follows: Quantity, quality, relation and manner (Hu Zhuanglin, 2015, p. 173).

Nevertheless, in the daily communication, people do not always follow the Cooperative Principle. Sometimes they will deliberately violate the principle. At this time, it often has an implication. Humor often appears at this time. This is completely showed in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

### 3.2 Sentence Analysis Based on the Cooperative Principle

Some examples are extracted from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to analyze the violation of the Cooperative Principle.

#### 3.2.1 The violation of the maxim of quantity

Example (7) "I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 13)

Miss Watson talked with Huck about Heaven. But Huck referred to Tom. Tom was irrelevant to their talk. It violates quantity of the Cooperative Principle. Huck said more than Miss Watson wanted to know.

Example (8) "I'll give you something better- I'll give you a cowhide." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 77)

The first half of the sentence violating the maxim of quantity is unnecessary. His father gives more information than Huck wants to know. Its purpose is only to create a humorous atmosphere.

#### 3.2.2 The violation of the maxim of quality

Example (9) "I judged I could see that there was two Providences and a poor chap would stand considerable show with the widow's Providence, but if Miss Watson's got him there wasn't no help for him anymore." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 45)

In this world, Providence is non-existent, let alone there were two Providences. So this sentence is false. It is contrary to the maxim of quality. It shows that religious theory has a great influence on children.

Example (10) "Jim got out his hairball and said something over it, and then he held it up and dropped it on the floor." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 66)

Jim said there was a fairy in the knitting wool, who knows everything. That's not true, but Jim believed it. It is contrary to the maxim of quality. He said what he may not believe.

#### 3.2.3 The violation of the maxim of relation

Example (11) "I never seen anybody but lied one time or another." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 6)

It breaks relation of the Cooperative Principle. That is to be relevant. This sentence is irrelevant with the work. From the mouth of a child, we know literature was not entirely realistic, and many were fictitious. When we see this sentence, we can't help thinking whether we've made some reckless concoctions. It also reduces the reader's expectation of literary works to some extent.

Example (12) "What's your real name, now?"

"George Peters, mum." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 226)

It is contrary to the maxim of relation. It is unnecessary for the lady to know his real name. But in this conversation, they were talking about Huck's name. It belongs to scale joke. Huck said different names twice. It can be seen from this conversation that the lady discovered that he was not a girl from Huck's entrance. All she did was to test him. But Huck didn't find anything, but thought he could get through.

### 3.2.4 The violation of the maxim of manner

Example (13) "I got into my old rags and my sugar hogshead again, and was free and satisfied." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 8)

From this sentence, we don't know why he was free and satisfied. So it violates the maxim of manner. That is to avoid ambiguity. Maybe because he got into his old rags and his sugar hogshead again or maybe he had other reasons.

Example (14) "Your mother couldn't read, and she couldn't write, neither, before she died. None of the family couldn't before they died. I can't; and here you're a swelling yourself up like this." (Mark Twain, 1995, p. 75)

This sentence is very long and hard to read. It is contrary to be brief. Its meaning can be expressed in a brief sentence. Parents generally want their children to become talented and to be proud of their children's good grades. But Huck's father was ashamed that he had learned something. He felt the whole family had little knowledge, let alone him. He thought his son must not be more excellent than himself, or he will be uncontrolled. The idea is now ridiculous and not understandable.

### 3.3 The Effects of Mark Twain's Humor

By and large, Mark Twain's humor not only provides an example for other literary works, but also provides a reference to our understanding of humor in life. The author's humor serves the subject, while making the subject more profound by irony in humor. In this work, different protagonists use different humor languages, where language plays a role in indicating identity.

Most of the ordinary humor used in this work is something that readers can understand at once. Most of the common humor in this work is spoken from Huck's mouth. In theory, the most economical information should be used in oral language to express the purpose of the speaker. The author deliberately made use of redundant and false information when using humorous language.

The navigational humor in this work is dominated by statements and sentiments. The navigational humor mainly occurs during the escape of Huck and Jim on the sea. Jim is a slave who is afraid of being taken back by his master. Huck also worried that once Jim was arrested, he would also be regarded as a partner. In this case, their words violated the Cooperative Principle and thus produced a humorous effect.

American humor in this work mainly takes the form of dialogues. One of the main scenes of the conversation was Huck's conversation with others on the way to escape. Because Huck was afraid of being discovered by others, he was so eager to explain that he said that many unnecessary and irrelevant words, thus violating the principle of relation and the principle of manner. Another major scene took place when Jim was detained. The humorous language in this case also reflects the emergency situation at that time, which highlights the goodness of the children and makes a great contrast between their attitude towards the slaves and others.

## Conclusion

This thesis analyzes Mark Twain's humorous language in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. By dividing it into three categories: common humor, navigational humor, and American humor, the relevant humorous language in this work is cited, explained and analyzed. Combining with four maxims of the Cooperative Principle, this paper specifically explores which maxim these examples violate, thus putting forward the view that Mark Twain's writing style is famous for humor and satire. His humor is ironic, while his irony is full of humor. It is his humorous language that has made this work a classic, and made him a great writer. The charm of the language itself is enormous.

Compared with the previous research results, this paper pays more attention to the classification and analysis of humorous language in the work, which is also a supplement to the previous linguistic analysis. The previous research results are more theoretically analyzed the humorous language of this work. Though the researches from the perspective of the cooperative principle in linguistics have been done, they are more general. They mainly focus on the general analysis of the effects of violating the cooperative principle, but there is no example to demonstrate the inner meaning of the language itself in detail. So this paper makes up for this vacancy.

But this study mainly focuses on the language level and does not deeply analyze the social significance of the language. It is suggested that the study should be carried out from this aspect in the future.

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