

Verbal Humor in Chinese Debate From the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

—Taking Let's Talk for Example

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the conversational implicature of verbal humor based on Grice's cooperative principle (CP) to explore its generative mechanism in Chinese debate, taking a debate talk show in China, Let's Talk for example with qualitative analysis method. There are mainly three findings: firstly, the essence of debating language is violating the maxim of quantity. Secondly, sometimes it is necessary for debaters to confound some concepts to confuse opponents and create humor. Thirdly, the violations of CP frequently emerging in debating can be employed as a strong strategy to create humor, engage and persuade audience. This paper hopes to provide rhetorical and pragmatic strategies for debaters in Chinese debating.

Keywords: Verbal Humor; Cooperative Principle; Let's Talk

1. Introduction

Humor, can go back to the age of Plato and Aristotle as a long-term study object when the researches on humor began. Subsequently, various humor theories gradually were established, mainly focusing on superiority theory from the perspective of social behaviorism, relief theory from the perspective of psychoanalysis and incongruity theory from the perspective of psychological cognition (Yan Haiying 2010; Su Yihua 2015). Humor entered into people's vision in China when the famous translator, Lin Yutang translated humor into“幽默”. Since then, Humor has been studied in multitudinous disciplines in China. Until the 1980s, humor studies in linguistics had been occupying a significant position (Li Xianjin 2013). In linguistics, various factors contribute to the generation of humor, such as Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle (CP), Politeness Principle (PP), etc. Among these theories, verbal humor from the perspective of CP has been paid much attention of scholars with relatively important research value.

CP was put forward by American philosopher Herbert Paul Grice when he delivered a series of lectures at Harvard University in 1967. According to Grice, meaning of a utterance is divided into literal meaning and implied meaning, in which the latter refers to the conversational implicature, which is divergent from what the hearer receives in reality. Verbal humor is produced mostly as a result of flouting CP. CP provides a strong theoretical foundation for verbal humor. Therefore, researches on verbal humor from the perspective of CP gradually come into scholars' notice.

However, the studies of verbal humor from the perspective of CP mainly focus on literature, films, sitcoms, while little attention has been given to verbal humor in Chinese debate. Therefore, this paper hopes provide more references for this gap .

2. Study Background

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Grice put forward the CP in 1967, which was described as making your conversational contribution required by the accepted intention or orientation of the interaction in which you are engaged (Grice 1975). Grice was calculated to interpret the course of real interactions, in which the speaker usually expresses the implied meaning to the listener by violating the maxims of CP. The maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner are ingredients of CP.

2.1.1 The maxim of quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purpose of the exchange).
2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. (Grice 1975)

2.1.2 The maxim of quality

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. (Grice 1975)

2.1.3 The maxim of relation

1. Be relevant. (Grice 1975)

2.1.4 The maxim of manner

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
4. Be orderly. (Grice 1975)

2.2 Literature Review

Firstly, in terms of introductory studies of humor with CP, Liu Naishi (2002) discusses the pivotal theories influencing the generation of verbal humor, in two aspects: Raskin's modes of bona-fide and non-bona-fide communication (1985) and the mention theory deriving from Sperber and Wilson (1981). He gives priority to the CP in explaining humorous phenomena, which is more universal and practical than other theories.

Secondly, in terms of analytical studies on specific corpus, the subjects of verbal humor from the perspective of CP mainly focus on sitcoms, literature (Guo Wentao 2013), films (Liu Xiangyu 2016), etc. For instance, Li Qing & Shi Xiaoling (2013) analyzed the humorous examples in a sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* with CP and offered some implications to English learners. However, little attention has been paid to debating language, although Zheng Min (2019) has analyzed some examples of *Let's Talk* from rhetoric, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. But examples were chosen from the first five seasons of *Let's Talk* in 2018. The humor corpus chosen can be larger and newer.

In general, few studies specifically deal with verbal humor in debating from the perspective of CP. Among various researches on *Let's Talk*, most focus on discourse analysis (Sun Xiaojiao 2018), stance (Ma Congcong) and rhetorical strategies, while few explores verbal humor. Therefore, this paper will investigate the verbal humor from the perspective of CP by analyzing the seventh season of *Let's Talk* to ensure the timeliness of corpus.

3. Verbal Humor Analysis in *Let's Talk* From the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

3.1 Violations of the Maxim of Quantity

Example 1:

Debate topic: 做人最重要的是开心吗?

Fu Shouer: 开心当然更重要啊。不然我儿子就该叫多苦了。

Fu answers the question positively, until which the communication should have been finished. But she adds a sentence that if happiness is not the most significant thing in the world, then her son should be called“多苦” (Her son's name is“多乐”). She breached the maxim of quantity to enhance persuasion and cause laughter. By doing this, she not only expresses her stance that happiness is crucial, but also produces verbal humor.

Example 2:

Debate Topic: 妈妈疯狂应援男明星，我该不该阻拦?

Cheng Lu: 不该，为什么？其一，……有句话叫再不疯狂就老了，他们呢，再不疯狂就没了。其二，……。

About the debate topic, it seems that Cheng Lu's description and structure are common for debaters. However, facing this kind of yes-no question, Cheng can just answer“ 不该 ”to the question. But he violates the maxim of quantity by adding reasons. This is a debating context, in which debaters should present both viewpoints and reasons to persuade audience, debate opponents and create humor.

Enlightened by this example, in fact, the essence of debating language is violating the maxim of quantity. Most descriptions of debaters are more informative than straightforward answer of debate topic in debating language to persuade audience and beat opponents, so it is not a

simple yes-no question.

3.2 Violations of the Maxim of Quality

Example 3:

Kang Jingjing: 我来的原因很简单，就是我太怕这节目撑不到第八季了。

Ma Dong: 真的，你说话还真的蛮吉利的。

Kang introduces that she is afraid that this TV show can't be sustained to the next season, so she comes here. Ma knows that Kang's expression is not auspicious, but he violates the maxim of quality to express the irony for Kang and creates humorous effects.

Example 4:

Debate topic: 我是职场新人，我的老板不喜欢我，要不要辞职？

Yang Tianzhen: 我这个人有个特点，就是说什么话，都是对的。

Yang violates the maxim of quality, because she knows not all she said is true necessarily and just wants to show her aggressiveness to audience with humorous effect. Therefore, it provides debaters a hint that for winning competition, sometimes debaters can express opinions that she are not sure about its authenticity.

3.3 Violations of the Maxim of Relation

Example 5:

Debate topic: 做人最重要的是开心吗？

Xiao Lu: 做人最重要的难道不是呼吸吗？如果做人最重要的是开心，那么世界上最快乐的人是胸腔外科的医生，因为他每天都可以开心。

Xiao Lu violates the maxim of relation, because“开心”from Xiao Lu has no connection with“开心”in the question, of which the question refers to happiness in spiritual level, while the answer refers to breath in physical level. Standing on the opposite side, Xiao Lu does not have a better answer of what the most important thing is for people, so she employs a nonsensical way, which not only answers the question, but also creates humor.

Example 6:

Ma Dong: 郑博中是清华的是吗？

Zheng: 对，我是清华在读大二学生。

Ma Dong: 噢，康菁菁是北大的是吗？

Kang: 我吗？我是努力长大的。

Under the premise of knowing the fact, Ma Dong deliberately asks Kang if she is from Peking University to make fun of her. Kang uses an irrelevant verb“长大”in order to avoid answering the question directly, which is totally divergent from the“大”in“北大”. Both are aware of Kang's violation of the maxim of relation, by which Kang not only avoids being ridiculed, but also shows her humor.

3.4 Violations of the Maxim of Manner

Example 7:

Debate Topic: 周围的同龄人过得比你好，该不该玩命追？

Xiao Lu: 就是高三的你，突然有一天发现你们全班都保送清华了，只有你自己一个人在教室里，周围的亲戚朋友过来问：“你为什么不去清华呀？是因为不喜欢吗？”

Xiao Lu uses analogy to create a situation for audience and let them be personally on the scene to experience the analogical feelings that all peers around live a better life than you, not because you dislike that life but other reasons, such as deficient ability. So she does not answer the question straightforward but uses a way of telling story to persuade audience that they should chase the desired life of their peers, by which she also creates a sense of humor.

Example 8:

Journalist: 为什么会选择傅首尔这样强大的对手呢?

Liu: 来都来了, 不摸摸天花板, 那多没意思。

Liu does not answer the debate question directly but uses a metaphor, describing that choosing an extraordinary opponent as touching the ceiling, which stands for the highest debating level. Therefore, Liu violates the maxim of manner to cause laughter of audience.

Conclusion

In short, this paper analyzes the conversational implicature of verbal humor based on Grice's CP to explore its generative mechanism in Chinese debate, taking an online debate talk show in China, Let's Talk for example with qualitative analysis method. There are mainly three findings: firstly, the essence of debating is violating the maxim of quantity. Because debaters often describe more than is required by adding or deleting information to create humor and persuade audience.

Secondly, debate question is a two-dimensional issue, so debating is to persuade others to support you for a subjective question. Sometimes it is necessary for debaters to express what they are not sure really to confound some concepts to confuse opponents and create humor.

Thirdly, the violations of cooperative principle frequently emerging in debating language can be employed as a strong strategy to create humor, engage and persuade audience. Various rhetorical strategies in debating include simile, metaphor, pun, analogy, irony, homophones, homographs, homonyms, idioms, aphorism, two-part allegorical saying, breaking confined thinking modes and so on.

However, the corpus of this study can be improved. This paper hopes to help people have a better understanding on the generation of verbal humor from the perspective of CP and provide pragmatic strategies for Chinese debating.

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