

# A Study of Humor in *Tan Talks Traffic* Based on the Cooperative Principle

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## Abstract

This study adopts the Cooperative Principle as the theoretical framework and examines *Tan Talks Traffic*, a popular local Chinese traffic-education program, to explore the mechanisms of verbal humor. By analyzing selected conversational excerpts, the study finds that humorous effects in the program are primarily achieved through deliberate violations of the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle. These pragmatic deviations not only enhance the program's entertainment value but also improve the effectiveness of traffic-safety education by creating a relaxed and engaging communicative atmosphere.

## Keywords

Verbal humor, the Cooperative Principle, *Tan Talks Traffic*.

## 1. Introduction

Humor is a pervasive communicative resource that not only entertains but also facilitates interpersonal interaction. In linguistic research, verbal humor has long been examined through pragmatic theories, among which Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) is one of the most widely applied frameworks. This study investigates how violations of the Cooperative Principle create humorous effects in *Tan Talks Traffic*, a widely viewed traffic-safety program in China. By analyzing representative conversations from the program, the study aims to reveal how humorous effects are generated through strategic departures from the Cooperative Principle. The findings can enrich pragmatic research on humor and offer insights into how humor can enhance everyday communication as well as public-education discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Verbal Humor and the Cooperative Principle

Previous studies on verbal humor have consistently emphasized the role of pragmatic factors, especially Grice's Cooperative Principle, in explaining how humorous effects emerge in interaction. According to Grice, effective communication is guided by four maxims [1]:

(1) The Maxim of Quantity

- a. Make your contribution as informative as is required
- b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

(2) The Maxim of Quality

- a. Do not say what you believe to be false
- b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

(3) The Maxim of Relevance

- a. Make your contributions relevant

(4) The Maxim of Manner

- a. Avoid obscurity

- b. Avoid ambiguity
- c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- d. Be orderly

However, in everyday communication, speakers often deliberately flout the Cooperative Principle, which requires listeners to go beyond the literal meaning of the utterance and try to understand the deeper intended meaning, that is, the conversational implicature. Such departures from the maxims are often closely associated with humorous effects.

Many scholars have noted that verbal humor often arises when speakers deliberately flout these maxims rather than strictly follow them. Attardo [2] and Raskin [3] argued that jokes and humorous utterances frequently rely on the systematic violation of conversational rules. More recent empirical studies have continued to explore how maxim flouting functions in different genres, such as literary texts, television dialogue, and online discourse, confirming that pragmatic norm violations remain a productive way to understand verbal humor [4].

## 2.2. Tan Talks Traffic

*Tan Talks Traffic* is an outstanding traffic educational program which has gained wide popularity in China due to the humor that is naturally manifested in the conversations between Officer Tan and interviewees. Jointly launched by the Chengdu Public Security Bureau and Chengdu Radio and Television Station, the show aired more than 1,000 times over 13 years, with each episode lasting six to ten minutes. It is a unique TV program that sets an exceptional example with its pioneering combination of authorities and news media. At the end of 2019, the host Officer Tan uploaded short video clips of *Tan Talks Traffic* on the Chinese video platform Bilibili, where they quickly won wide acclaim from netizens. As of December 2025, the account has attracted 5.28 million followers, released 457 short videos, and accumulated 660 million views. Research on *Tan Talks Traffic* has largely focused on media communication rather than humor. Existing studies examine the program's cooperative model between media and public security [5], its branding and communication strategies [6], the media and political logic behind its popularity [7], audience interaction and media positioning [8], and its role in urban image construction [9]. These studies illuminate its media significance but seldom address its linguistic or humorous mechanisms.

In summary, while verbal humor has been widely examined and *Tan Talks Traffic* has received attention in media studies, little research integrates the two. Specifically, the humorous effects generated by violations of the Cooperative Principle within this program remain underexplored. Therefore, this study applies the Cooperative Principle to analyze how verbal humor is constructed in *Tan Talks Traffic*, addressing a notable gap in current scholarship.

## 3. Analysis of Humor in Tan Talks Traffic from the Perspective of CP

In this part, this study selects typical conversation examples from *Tan Talks Traffic* and analyzes their humorous effects from the perspective of violating each maxim of the Cooperative Principle. Each humorous conversation is translated into English and analyzed in detail.

### 3.1. Verbal Humor Realized by Violating the Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of Quantity is the first maxim of the Cooperative Principle, which stipulates that a speaker's contribution to social communication should be as informational as necessary but not more informative than what is necessary [1]. The following two conversations show the humorous effect realized by violating the maxim of Quantity—by providing excessive information or insufficient information.

### 3.1.1. Excessive Information

Tan: Hello, please show me your driver's license.

Man: Why should I show you my license? I haven't done anything wrong.

Tan: I am a police officer, and I am lawfully asking you to show your driver's license. You must provide it to me.

Man: Even though you are a police officer, it doesn't mean I'll just hand over my license to you. It's not that if you want my license, I'll give it to you; if you want money, I'll give you money; if you want my car, I'll give you my car; if you want a house, I'll give you a house.

At first, Officer Tan straightforwardly asks the man to show his driver's license, which is entirely legitimate. But the man's response goes beyond a simple acknowledgment or compliance. Instead of briefly addressing the request, he elaborates on various scenarios, providing more information than necessary. The additional information includes offering money, his car, and even a house, which exceeds the specific request for the driver's license. The humor in this conversation is generated through the man's unnecessarily lengthy and uncooperative response to Officer Tan's routine request, introducing a playful and laughable element to the interaction.

### 3.1.2. Less Information

Tan: Madam, what happened just now? Are you angry?

Man: No, she's just having a strong reaction right now.

Tan: Madam, I notice that your reaction was intense when you talked to me just now. Are you thinking, "I picked those flowers, so what? What are you going to do about it?"

Man: No, she's just feeling nauseous.

Tan: Nauseous at the sight of me? I can't be that repulsive, can I?

Man: She's pregnant.

Officer Tan comes upon a young couple picking plum blossoms from the green belt along the lane. Their behavior is improper and unsafe, as the green belt is public property and should not be damaged. Furthermore, the bustling road and the endless stream of traffic also contain underlying risks. After Tan points out their wrongdoing, the woman seems upset, expressing an abnormally strong reaction. Initially, Tan thinks the woman is dissatisfied with his remarks, and the husband only briefly explains that "She's just feeling nauseous," omitting an explicit explanation. The root cause is actually that his wife is in a sensitive state—pregnancy. The husband flouts the maxim of Quantity, and thus a humorous misunderstanding occurs.

## 3.2. Verbal Humor Realized by Violating the Maxim of Quality

The maxim of Quality relates to the truthfulness and authenticity of the words. "It requires the speakers not to say what they believe to be false or anything lacking adequate evidence" [1]. However, in the real world, almost everyone tells lies for one reason or another. The following two conversations show the humorous effect realized by violating the maxim of Quality—by intentional deception, hyperbole and irony metaphor.

### 3.2.1. Intentional Deception

Tan: Is that your daughter? Are you operating illegally?

Motorcycle owner: She's my daughter.

Tan: Hey, young lady, come over. You are quite handsome, is this your dad?

Male passenger: Yes.

Tan: Are you a boy or a girl?

Male passenger: A boy.

Tan: Is this your son or your daughter?

Motorcycle owner: He's dressed like a girl.

Tan: So, not your son?

Motorcycle owner: Whether he's a boy or a girl, it doesn't matter. As long as he wants a ride, I'll pick him up and go.

The motorcycle owner claims that the male passenger is his daughter, which Officer Tan questions and then clarifies with the passenger directly. Eventually, the motorcycle owner admits that the passenger is not his daughter, yet he refuses to specify whether the passenger is male or female, implying that he is not being truthful about their relationship. Humor arises from the motorcycle owner's awkward attempt to cover up the truth and the subsequent revelation of the real situation. Officer Tan's playful questioning and the motorcycle owner's clumsy lies add a comedic element to the interaction.

### 3.2.2. Hyperbole

Tan: Madam, wait a moment and take my car. Officer Tan will give you a ride home, okay?

Man: She will get car sick.

Tan: No way, I drive surprisingly smoothly. You can trust me. And my car has a nickname, "Pregnant Woman's Car." Many pregnant women have ridden in my car, and those who have ridden in my car have all had their wishes come true. If they wanted a son, they had a son; if they wanted a daughter, they had a daughter.

Man: Really?

Tan: Absolutely, I'm not lying to you. So, come and ride in my car.

Out of safety concerns, Officer Tan tries to persuade a pregnant woman to ride in his police car. In order to alleviate all doubts, Tan makes exaggerated claims about his car having a nickname ("Pregnant Woman's Car") and suggests a connection between riding in his car and having wishes come true. It is clear that he is using hyperbole because his elaborate description of the police car is purely impromptu and illogical. The conversation proceeds with a lighthearted and amusing tone, using humor to make the offer of a ride more entertaining. The playful hyperbole and the unexpected claims about the car's magical properties create outstanding humorous effects.

### 3.2.3. Irony

Tan: Your running a red light today, this traffic violation, is related to your usual lack of interest and disregard for the spirit of our Chinese national football team.

Man: We, real men, don't bother learning from them.

Tan: Why not learn? You definitely should. When it comes to traffic and facing a red light, you must embrace the spirit of the Chinese national football team—never advance, never, ever make advances. I deeply feel that this is the national team's greatest contribution to traffic, a tremendous spiritual wealth they've left for humanity. I sincerely and joyfully extend the highest respect to the national football team.

Officer Tan catches a car driver running a red light. During this dialogue of traffic education, Tan builds a funny connection between the traffic violation and the failure of the Chinese national football team, exhorting the driver to embrace the spirit of the Chinese national football team. The logic behind this seemingly ridiculous connection is that the Chinese national football team always loses in all kinds of international football events but never makes advances. If the driver follows the team's spirits by not advancing at a red light, he would not break traffic laws. In fact, Officer Tan is employing a form of witty commentary by using the irony to highlight the football team's repeated failures in international competitions, suggesting that the driver can avoid failure (breaking traffic laws) by following the team's "successful" approach of never making advances. His use of irony adds a layer of humor to the dialogue. It becomes a playful way for Tan to address the traffic violation.

### 3.3. Verbal Humor Realized by Violating the Maxim of Relation

According to the maxim of Relation, speakers should provide information that is relevant to the current topic [1]. The two primary methods for violating this maxim observed in this program are providing irrelevant information and changing the topic.

#### 3.3.1. Irrelevant Information

Tan: I'm asking you, which road should you take?

Man: I'm going to Erxian Bridge.

Tan: No, I mean, which driveway should you take?

Man: Take Chenghua Avenue.

Tan: You've confused me.

An elderly man is riding a cycle rickshaw in the lane for motor vehicles, and Officer Tan stops him. Officer Tan tries to remind the elderly man which lane he should use, specifically whether it should be the lane for motor vehicles or the one for non-motorized vehicles. But the elderly man first answers, "To Erxian Bridge," and the second time he says "Take Chenghua Avenue," both of which are unrelated to the question. This indicates a deviation from the relevant information Officer Tan was seeking, and it contributes to confusion. The mismatch between Officer Tan's specific question about lanes and the elderly man's response about his destination creates confusion and helps to generate an amusing moment. In the end, Officer Tan's expression of confusion also adds to the comedic effect by highlighting the disconnect between the question and the response.

#### 3.3.2. Topic Change

Tan: The scooter is in such a ramshackle state; Korean scooters just can't withstand crashes.

Man: What Korean scooter?

Tan: Yeah, on your electric scooter, it says "SIMIDA."

Man: It's "Minsida."

Tan: At a glance, it looks a bit like "SIMIDA."

Man: We never use Korean and Japanese goods. We support domestic products.

Tan: Good! Supporting domestic products is good. We all use domestically made ones.

Man: If you're going to buy a new kitchen cupboard, use domestic Bester. We are Bester Kitchen Cupboard.

Tan: Hold on, who allowed you to advertise? No advertising is allowed here.

The man rides a ramshackle electric scooter. Officer Tan starts by discussing the condition of the scooter and its manufacturer. However, the man suddenly redirects the conversation to promote his domestic kitchen cupboard brand, a radical departure from the initial topic. This deviation violates the maxim of Relation. When the man abruptly shifts the topic from the scooter to promoting his kitchen cupboards seemingly out of nowhere, unique humorous effects are produced, leaving a memorable impression on viewers.

### 3.4. Verbal Humor Realized by Violating the Maxim of Manner

The maxim of Manner, unlike the previous maxims, relates not "to what is said but, rather, to how what is said to be said" [1]. It demands that the participants communicate in an unambiguous, organized, and clear manner. There are several instances of the Manner maxim being broken in *Tan Talks Traffic*, which greatly adds to the comedic effect.

#### 3.4.1. Malapropism

Tan: Can you share a bit about your life?

Man: It's just like the theme song of the Olympics sings, "Oil and rice, come together."

Tan: What does that song have to do with it?

Man: It's straightforward. In this lifetime, it's all about food and clothes. As long as there's oil and rice, we can have a meal.

Tan: Oh! You mean that English song, "You and Me."

Officer Tan invites the man to share his life, and out of everyone's expectation, the man responds with his singing of the theme song of the Beijing 2008 Summer Olympics. Even more surprising, he alters the lyrics by finding the amazing phonetic similarity between two pairs of English words and Chinese words. The pronunciation of "油" (yóu) in Chinese highly resembles "You" in English, and the pronunciation of "米" (mǐ) in Chinese also bears a striking similarity to "Me" in English, too. In such an astonishing coincidence, the adapted lyrics remain logically consistent, perfectly matching the question raised by Officer Tan. The man's clever showcase of the manipulation of language and the brilliant use of malapropism between English and Chinese introduce a degree of ambiguity and confusion for Officer Tan, adding to the comedic effect.

### 3.4.2. Repetition

Tan: Do you know what you just did?

Man: I know, please don't take points off my license.

Tan: It seems you're aware of your traffic violation.

Man: I know, please don't take points off my license.

Tan: You ran a red light.

Man: Please don't take points off my license, please don't take points off my license.

From beginning to end, no matter what Officer Tan says, the man only repeatedly responds with one phrase "please don't take points off my license," trying to plead for impunity. Instead of responding to Officer Tan's statements about the traffic violation or engaging in a more varied dialogue, he repeats the same request multiple times. The sheer repetitiveness of the man's response creates a comedic effect because the man seems to be stuck on a single phrase, as if repeating it more would increase the likelihood of the absurd request being granted.

### 3.4.3. Paradox

Tan: Hello, can you explain what's going on?

Man: No need for explanations. It's not meaningful to explain. Anyway, the goods have already been loaded.

Tan: Are you trying to say that since the goods are already loaded, explanations are useless? Explaining is just covering up, and covering up is about making up stories.

Man: I don't have any stories. I'm from Ziyang. I didn't finish junior high school and went to work in Guangdong. I worked there for eight or nine years. It was okay in the first place, but later I felt that there were too many people and too competitive. So, I came back to Chengdu and started a small business here, dealing with office furniture, and I've been doing it for over ten years. I feel like doing business in the hometown is a bit better than in Guangdong, because I'm more familiar with my hometown.

Tan: I, I understand now. This is the story you've made up.

Man: This is something I've personally experienced.

Officer Tan intercepts a man who has illegally loaded goods onto his small car. At first, the man confidently claims that no explanation is needed. However, he later provides a rather detailed and lengthy statement about his past personal experiences. Consequently, his words are inconsistent. The humorous effect is heightened when the man proceeds to offer a detailed narrative immediately after dismissing the need for one, creating a paradox. Tan humorously highlights this contradiction, and thus, humor arises from the violation of the maxim of Manner.

## 4. Conclusion

In *Tan Talks Traffic*, verbal humor is produced through violations of the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle: the maxim of Quantity, the maxim of Quality, the maxim of Relation, and the maxim of Manner. For the maxim of Quantity, verbal humor arises when speakers provide either more information or less information than required. For the maxim of Quality, verbal humor is generated through intentional deception, hyperbole, and irony. Violations of the maxim of Relation appear in the form of irrelevant information and sudden topic changes. As for the maxim of Manner, verbal humor is created through malapropism, repetition, and paradox. These findings show that the program relies on various ways of flouting the maxims to create humorous interactions. Furthermore, the findings suggest that humor in *Tan Talks Traffic* plays an important role in traffic education. By using humorous responses and light-hearted interactions, Officer Tan reduces the tension of enforcement scenes and makes traffic rules easier for the public to understand and accept. The humorous dialogues also strengthen the interpersonal relationship between the officer and the interviewees, making the communication more effective. This indicates that humor is not only a linguistic strategy but also a useful tool for improving the communication of public safety information.

In summary, based on ten representative conversations, this study examines how verbal humor in *Tan Talks Traffic* is generated through deliberate violations of the four cooperative maxims. The analysis demonstrates that the intentional breaking of these maxims serves as an important strategy for producing humorous effects in the program. Through these humorous dialogues, the show not only entertains viewers but also helps them better understand the reasons behind traffic rules.

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