

An Analysis of Verbal Humor of the Dialogues in American Situation Comedies from the Perspective of Pragmatics

--Take 2 Broke Girls as an Example

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Abstract

In recent years, technological advancements have facilitated the increased penetration of American sitcoms into the lives of Chinese audiences, transforming them into a prominent form of recreational entertainment. Notably, upon its release, the sitcom "2 Broke Girls" garnered substantial attention both domestically and internationally, with its humorous dialogues exhibiting a potent comedic effect. Given the significant emphasis Westerners place on humor, an analysis of the humorous dialogues in American sitcoms provides a valuable lens through which to gain deeper insights into Western cultural nuances and infuse mundane existence with amusement. Furthermore, this paper adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore verbal humor from a pragmatic perspective. It employs Grice's Cooperative Principle and Leach's Politeness Principle as the theoretical framework. By analyzing the dialogues in "2 Broke Girls," this thesis delves into the mechanics underpinning the creation of speech humor. The findings reveal that the violation of the four maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle, as well as the six maxims of Leach's Politeness Principle, serves as a primary means to elicit verbal humor in this sitcom. Consequently, the breach of these two principles emerges as the dominant strategy for achieving humorous effect in "2 Broke Girls."

Keywords

Pragmatics, Humor, Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle.

1. Introduction

Humor is a ubiquitous and multifaceted phenomenon in human society, manifested through diverse forms and sources. It offers numerous benefits, enhancing efficiency and interest in work and study, while also serving as an antidote to depression, fostering positivity and optimism. Consequently, humor has been a subject of extensive scholarly inquiry, with notable figures such as Aristotle, Socrates, Bergson, Freud, Kostler, McGhee, Raskin, Attardo, and Goria contributing to our understanding. Their research has consistently highlighted the intimate relationship between humor and language use, necessitating in-depth investigations into syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Significant advancements have been made in this field since the 20th century.

The study of humor in American sitcoms, particularly those with a long history like sitcoms, offers multiple insights. Firstly, humor in these works brings joy and relaxation, providing a window into American culture. Understanding humor in American movies and TV shows not only enriches cultural life but also facilitates friendly exchanges between cultures. Secondly, sitcoms are an art form with historical significance, and studying them promotes artistic development and cultivates sentiment and perception of life. "2 Broke Girls," a popular sitcom among youth, serves as a case study to understand what makes sitcoms appealing and humorous. Finally, given the syntactic differences between Chinese and English, analyzing

dialogues in "2 Broke Girls" can help native Chinese speakers grasp authentic English usage more effectively.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Humor

The term "humor" originated from the Latin word meaning "damp" and later evolved to refer to "bodily fluids." In the 5th century B.C., the Greek scholar Hippocrates proposed the concept of "four types of humor pathology," which identified four bodily fluids—blood, mucus, bile, and melancholy juice—collectively known as "humors." These fluids were believed to determine a person's temperament, with variations leading to distinct temperaments and personalities. Over time, the definition of humor shifted from its pathological meaning to a unique temperament or personality trait capable of giving rapid feedback to inconsistencies such as inversions and contradictions. However, this differs significantly from the modern understanding of humor.

During the Renaissance, the focus of humor shifted from the human humor to the human temperament influenced by the humor, and the term humor was transferred from the medical field to the life field. By the end of the 16th century, the English playwright Ben Jonson introduced humor into the realm of art, refining and enriching it into a complex and multidimensional aesthetic concept. Despite numerous explorations by Western and Chinese philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, Schopenhauer, Kant, and Freud, no authoritative definition of humor has emerged. Writers, critics, and artists have offered their individual definitions based on their creations, resulting in a multitude of interpretations. Some dictionaries provide straightforward definitions, such as humor being everything that is funny and ridiculous, a stimulus capable of inducing laughter, or a compilation of comical things and anecdotes.

Regarding the role of humor, its characteristics include wit, self-deprecation, flirtation, and wittiness, among others. Humor plays a crucial role in establishing a good atmosphere, enabling people to relax and strengthen relationships, creating a friendly, relaxed, and sincere atmosphere of cooperation. In the workplace, humor has been found to enhance productivity. A survey of mid-level supervisors who underwent humor training in a Colorado company revealed a 15% increase in production within nine months, along with a reduction in sick days. Humor has also been linked to higher IQ scores and resilience in psychological tests. People with a sense of humor tend to have better rapport in daily life, shortening the distance in interpersonal communication and earning goodwill and trust. In contrast, those lacking humor may struggle in interactions and their image may suffer. Humor also helps people cope with difficulties more optimistically and open-mindedly, reducing tension and psychological burden.

2.2. Sitcoms

A sitcom, short for situational comedy, is a genre of comedy that first emerged on radio and later transferred its charm to the television screen. It is characterized by a fixed ensemble of lead actors and one or more storylines that revolve around a limited number of settings, such as a family home, a workplace, or a campus environment. These settings serve as the backdrop for the comedic narratives that unfold episode after episode.

The structure of a sitcom is relatively consistent. With rare exceptions, episodes typically run for about 30 minutes, and there is a growing trend towards shorter episodes. Each episode tells a complete story with its own subtitle, maintaining a degree of continuity with previous episodes in terms of character relationships and plot threads. New episodes are usually aired during prime time, on a weekly basis, on national commercial networks or cable pay-TV

networks. A typical sitcom season consists of around 25 episodes, and production and broadcasting continue as long as the show maintains a certain level of audience ratings.

Since the 1970s, sitcoms have diversified in terms of subject matter. While they often focus on everyday life scenarios that are easy for viewers to relate to, their content has expanded to include science fiction marvels, cold war plots, police and criminal stories, military life, and even war itself. This diversity has broadened the appeal of sitcoms and made them a staple of television programming.

In terms of character types, sitcoms primarily feature three kinds of roles. Regular characters, or main characters, are present throughout each episode and serve as the focal point of the narrative. Examples include Lucy and Richie in "I Love Lucy" and Rachel and Monica in "Friends". Secondary characters play a functional role in the show, such as regulars in a bar or neighbors in a community, and often have easily recognizable symbolic traits. Guest actors, on the other hand, appear in one or more episodes and may have significant roles, often bringing star power to the show to increase its impact.

Sitcoms are also known for their limited number of major scenes, primarily indoor settings. Early sitcoms used stage sets, but as production costs increased, this approach was phased out. Today, sitcoms feature exquisite closed sets that meet the audience's visual requirements, and laughter in the background is often post-recorded.

The humorous characteristics of sitcoms are diverse and distinct. First, they are light and cheerful, often accompanied by harmonious laughter. The humor is light-hearted and playful, using slapstick and other comic forms to release the confusion, longing, expectation, and helplessness in the characters' lives. Second, sitcoms often create dissonance, or a sense of incongruity, through the inconsistency between essence and phenomenon. This psychological expectation gap is crucial for the formation of humor in sitcoms. Third, the humor is situational, based on spatialized live situations that put characters in various embarrassing, absurd, and ridiculous scenarios that deviate from the norm. Finally, sitcoms as a comprehensive art form present diverse artistic characteristics, including various forms of verbal humor such as lies, absurd words, parodies, and puns.

2.3. 2 Broke Girls

The sitcom, a popular genre in television entertainment, has its roots in stand-up comedy, which was an early and widespread form of radio entertainment. After the advent of television following World War II, this medium underwent a rapid expansion, incorporating various forms of entertainment, including sitcoms. One of the pioneering sitcoms was "Mary Kay and Johnny," produced in 1947, which established the foundation for the subsequent development of early American sitcoms.

Throughout the years, sitcoms have undergone significant diversification in terms of subject matter. While their content has ranged from science fiction to Cold War themes, the majority of sitcoms continue to be grounded in the ordinary lives of everyday people, featuring straightforward and accessible plots. This enduring appeal to everyday experiences can be attributed, in part, to the evolving audience demographics.

A notable shift in American sitcoms occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. This dramatic change was primarily driven by the transformation in television audiences, as the first generation of children who had grown up with television reached adulthood. This audience was eager to see previously taboo topics and social realities reflected on their screens.

Among the many sitcoms that have emerged in recent years, "2 Broke Girls" stands out as a notable example. This show follows the story of two young waitresses who form an unlikely friendship at a diner and aspire to start a successful small business. Despite working in a less-than-ideal environment, they hope to raise enough money to realize their dream. "2 Broke Girls" has been well-received by audiences, particularly among college students and young men.

It garnered a 7.1 rating among adults aged 18-49 during its initial broadcast and attracted over 21.5 million viewers when digital video recorder viewers were included, earning an 8.1 rating in the same demographic. Additionally, the show won the award for Favorite New TV Comedy at the 38th Annual People's Choice Awards in 2012, further underscoring its popularity and critical acclaim.

In conclusion, sitcoms have evolved from their early days as radio entertainment to become a diverse and popular genre in television. While their themes and content have varied widely, the appeal of everyday experiences and relatable characters remains a constant. "2 Broke Girls" serves as a contemporary example of this enduring appeal, having garnered widespread praise and recognition among its target audience.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. Definition of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is concerned with the study of meaning in context, focusing on how utterances are interpreted in specific situations. It examines how social contexts influence language use and how speakers utilize sentences to facilitate successful communication.

3.2. Cooperative Principle and Maxims

Grice's cooperative principle outlines guidelines for effective communication. The maxim of quality emphasizes truthfulness and evidence, while the maxim of quantity ensures that information is neither excessive nor insufficient. The maxim of relation requires relevance to the conversation's purpose, and the manner maxim advocates for clarity and directness in expression. (Grice, 1975)

3.3. Politeness Principle and Maxims

In the book *Principles of Pragmatics*, the British linguist Leach proposed the politeness principle in conversation. Politeness is a common phenomenon shared by all groups in society, a tool and a means to maintain interpersonal harmony, and its main purpose is to maintain "face" and thus to make communication successful. The analysis of the humor takes effect in *2 Broke Girls* by applying the politeness principle. The maxims of politeness principle contain several guidelines. Firstly, the tact maxim is to minimize cost to other and maximize benefit to other. Secondly, the generosity maxim is to minimize benefit to self and maximize cost to self. Thirdly, the approbation maxim is to minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. Fourthly, the modesty maxim is to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. Fifthly, the agreement maxim is to minimize disagreement between self and other and maximize agreement between self and other. Sixthly, the sympathy maxim is to minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other.

4. Discussion

4.1. Data Collection

The data for the analysis of verbal humor in this thesis are taken from the well-known American comedy series *2 Broke Girls*. The American situation comedy *2 Broke Girls* is a suitable corpus for this study. The novelty and popularity of this situation comedy among the audience play an important role in the choice of the corpus. Since 2011, this sitcom has been broadcast on television and it always has a great deal of praise. The episodes, full of topical and genuine humor, are a great source of humor and have a high viewership. Conversational humor in the American language offers a dynamic and rich resource for the study of verbal humor. This method will improve the analysis of verbal humor in conversational texts. There are 24 episodes in each season of *2 Broke Girls*. And I downloaded them from www.shooter.cn.

4.2. The Violation of Maxims of Cooperative Principle in 2 Broke Girls

In everyday conversation, the CP and its maxims will not be followed by everybody all the time. People violate them and tell lies. The Cooperative Principle is the premise for participants to continue their talk normally and smoothly. People often observe the Cooperative Principle in their conversation, but it doesn't mean that they will always observe its four maxims. On the contrary, people sometimes violate the maxims deliberately or not deliberately. If it is violated unintentionally, misunderstandings or stupid mistakes will occur. If it is violated intentionally, it means that the speaker wants to add implied meaning to the original meaning.

a. Violating the Maxim of Quantity

The maxim of quantity can be flouted in two ways: more information is given or less information is given. For example:

X: I love the color of your shoes. Where did you buy it?

Y: A store.

In this dialogue, X wants to know where Y brought this shoe. But Y didn't give the specific information and he only says "a store". Certainly, we know these shoes are brought from a store, which flouts the maxim of quantity. Actually, the ultimate answer that X wants to know is that the specific address of the store where these shoes are sold.

Example 1:

Caroline: There's something we have to talk about.

Max: This can't be about my drinking. I don't have the money to be a real alcoholic.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 6)

Max's answer "This can't be about my drinking" is a complete answer, stating that this thing should have nothing to do with her drinking. But Max also stated the reason why this thing is irrelevant to her drinking. Actually, no one asked the reason, but she took the initiative to say extra information, which violates the maxim of quantity. And this statement describes Max is so poor that even can't be an alcoholic, thus achieving a humorous effect.

b. Violating the Maxim of Quality

When a speaker says something blatantly false, such as telling lies, or for which he lacks adequate evidence, or even figures of speech, the maxim of quality is violated. For example: Amy is made of water.

On the surface, this sentence is false. Because Amy, a human being, can't really be made of only water. So, the content is false, which flouts quality maxim. But from another perspective, this sentence is a description of Amy's characteristic. It uses metaphor to describe how fragile Amy is.

Example 2:

Caroline: How could ketchup get this hard?

Max: You just hold it in your hand like this, and say you are the biggest ketchup I've ever had.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 22)

Discussing the reason why the ketchup hardens, Max replied the reason is that she holds it in her hand and says you are the biggest ketchup I have ever seen. Evidently, this is not practical, and holding the ketchup and talking to it won't change the ketchup. So, this expression violates the maxim of quality and contribute to humor.

c. Violating the Maxim of Relation

The maxim of relation can be flouted in two ways: giving hints and giving association clues. Here comes an example:

X: What a fine day! Let's go on a picnic, how do you think about that?

Y: I will take an exam in 2 days.

In this dialogue, X would like to go on a picnic with Y.

However, not saying yes or no, Y says he will take an exam in 2 days. It isn't relevant to the foregoing question. Thus, Y flouts relation maxim. At first glance, taking exam is irrelevant to going on a picnic, but when Y thinks more deeply and carefully, she will know Y can't go on a picnic with her because he has to spend most of his time on preparing for the exam. So, from Y's answer, X knows the conversational implicature that "I can't go out for outdoor activities with you now."

Example 3:

Caroline: What is this, a student loan? Oh, my God, Max, you went to college? That Wasn't a judgment. It was just shocking...kind of like seeing a baby smoke on the Internet.

Max: I love that kid.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 2 Episode 14)

While helping Max with his bills, Caroline stumbled upon Max's student loan bill and was surprised to find out that Max had gone to college. Max didn't want to talk about the bill, so he deliberately changed the subject and said, "I love that baby." This response politely informed Caroline that she did not want to talk about any of the bills. It is a violation of the maxim of relation. The audience laughed at Max's unrelated falsehoods.

d. Violating the Maxim of Manner

When a speaker deliberately provides obscure, ambiguous, prolix or disordered information, the maxim of manner is violated. For example:

X: Let's buy something to eat.

Y: OK, but I don't want P-O-R-K!

In these two sentences, A wants to buy some food to eat, so he or she asks for Y's suggestion. But not speaking out the whole form of the word directly, Y speaks "pork" letter by letter, so Y violates the maxim of manner. Actually, X and Y know that B can directly speak the word "pork". So, X knows the reasons why Y did it like that. Y did that deliberately. By doing that, X can get Y's conversational implicature that "I want all the food except for the pork and I don't want to eat pork."

Example 4:

Max: That's the snow when you are rich. The only snow angels you'll see this year are the six crack addicts frozen to our stoop. Not to mention the adorable frozen horse we have illegally living in the backyard.

Caroline: Max, don't overreact. Chestnut's fine. It's gonna for weeks.

Max: All right, have it your way. But I wouldn't want to be the next tenants who have figure out why a pissed off horse is haunting a Brooklyn apartment. I was cold and she thought she knew weather patterns.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 16)

In this dialogue, the expression is not very concise and clear. Max thinks it inappropriate to put horse outdoors but she didn't say that directly. She just acts like the horse, complaining his hilarious master who is a smart aleck. Thus, Max flouts manner maxim. By doing it, Caroline will know that it is unwise to put her horse outdoors in the cold weather.

4.3. The Violation of Maxims of Politeness Principle in 2 Broke Girls

a. Violation of Tact Maxim

The principle of tact requires the speaker to treat others with respect and to do as little damage and as much good as possible to other in the conversation. In sitcoms, the effect of violating this rule in sitcoms is to make the audience laugh while losing face.

Example 5:

Johnny: I know, I'm a bad boy. Look, the reason I'm not sitting in your section is because my buddy Carlos is crushing pretty hard on Caroline, and he asked me to do what I can to hook them up.

Max: Oh. So now you're a bartender, a street artist, and a pimp.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 7)

Based on this dialogue, we are able to find that we can tell that Johnny and Max got into an argument about why Johnny wasn't sitting in Max's area. He explained to Max why, but she unceremoniously tends not to believe it, thinking it was an excuse. Max flirts with his more than one profession, not only a bartender, but also the pimp, which is a violation of tact maxim. Through making the other side lose face, it is likely to achieve comedic effect.

b. Violation of Generosity Maxim

It can be understood that allowing the other person to benefit in verbal communication, while sitcoms often feature the principle of generosity. It requires the speaker to benefit the other person as little as possible and to damage the other person.

Example 6:

Caroline: Remember us the ones who tipped you 100 bucks.

Waiter: Oh, of course! It's hard to find that kind of generosity in this place. It gives me hope again.

Caroline: Yeah, we are gonna need that back.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 3 Episode 23)

Caroline owes Nicky a lot of money for betting on horses, and Earl, who learns of this, plans to come back to the game to help them pay back the money, but the two are struggling to get the money back. At this point Caroline saw the waiter who had given a huge tip two days before and demanded the money back. The "message" is conveyed by the speaker in this conversation is completely contrary to the principle of generosity, and even more so to the previous generous.

c. Violation of Approbation Maxim

This guideline calls for less disparagement and more praise in communication. Violation of this rule in sitcom dialogues can often have a humorous effect of "undermining" the other person.

Example 7:

Max: Here you go, Earl. Table 12 throwing down a credit card on a patty melt. They really need those eight airline miles? Where they going...New Jersey?

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 6)

According to this sentence, we can know that the customer only ordered a meatloaf and want to swipe his card in order to get some points to exchange for airline miles, which is very ridiculous. "Where they going...New Jersey?" is a kind of exaggeration because New Jersey is just a river away from New York. This dialogue represented how mean and fragile the customer is. It is a violation of approbation maxim and then make the audience laugh.

d. Violation of Modesty Maxim

The code of modesty means to praise oneself less or belittle oneself less in communication, in order to lower one's own status or elevate the status of the other. Sitcom dialogues often do the opposite, deliberately elevating themselves to produce "laughs".

Example 8:

Earl: Hello, Sophie. If you looked any sweeter, you would fire up my diabetes.

Sophie: Oh, Earl. You wouldn't be the first man to lose a limb over me.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 22)

In this dialogue, Earl praises Sophie's loveliness with vigor. Usually, when a girl heard about her praise, she may feel shy and behaves modestly. However, Sophie said that Earl is not the only

man that is obsessed by her beauty. She is very straight-forward to accept this admiration, which violates modesty maxim and make this dialogue humorous.

e. Violation of Agreement Maxim

This principle focuses on seeking intermediate zone while facing differences in communication. In sitcoms, it is often disagreement, not consensus, that produces humor.

Example 9:

Caroline: You deserve a cupcake shop, and I deserve a new bed.

Max: All you have to do is dream it.

Caroline: No, all you have to do is do it.

Max: And for you to build a Murphy bed, it'll take a miracle.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 6)

In this dialogue, there is a divergence between Max and Caroline. Caroline is very positive about their career and wants to have a new bed, while Max doesn't think so. It is a violation of agreement maxim. However, it is the debating that makes this dialogue funny. As we know, what often produces humorous effects is disagreement

f. Violation of Sympathy Maxim

The purpose of this code is to reduce dislike and increase empathy between the interlocutors. In sitcoms, the violation of the sympathy principle in the dialogue can generate laughs because of the specific scenes and characters.

Example 10:

Passerby: Nina, if you two are bakers, maybe you should break up some of those cupcakes, so we all don't starve.

Max: No one is touching these cupcakes. Our entire future is riding on these mothers.

(2 Broke Girls, Season 1 Episode 22)

According to this dialogue, we find that the passerby feels very hungry and wanted to eat Max's cupcakes. But Max did not care about their hunger and did not agree to their request to eat the cupcakes. To Max, these cupcakes are her future. This is an obvious sign of no compassion and it violates sympathy maxim. It takes advantage of violation of sympathy maxim to represent funniness.

5. Conclusion

Through study, the specific analysis of classical dialogues shows that the violation of the four principles of cooperation and the six principles of politeness are important means for sitcoms to produce humorous effects.

2 Broke Girls is a popular sitcom with funny words and exaggerated actions. It brings a lot of joy to people, being well received by the general audience. We think that studying the verbal humor in American sitcoms is a useful method to reflecting the way in which how westerners think and perform in language. Understanding how Westerners create humor is not only beneficial to understand and use English, but also to Chinese people's understanding of Western culture and cross-cultural communication.

In this thesis, shortcomings still exist. First, not all humorous phenomena can be explained by the cooperative principle and politeness principle. Second, a comprehensive explanation cannot be given for all the verbal humor in this play. Third, there is a lot of humor that exists outside of speech that is not addressed in this paper, such as the misuse of language. And the non-verbal humor in this sitcom is no less important than the verbal humor. Therefore, as for the further study, the next scholars can analyze the reasons for the humorous effects of the play from multiple perspectives.

Acknowledgements

To begin with, I'm really grateful to my supervisor who helped me a lot to finish this thesis during the several months. She gave me many suggestions that are very useful to me, which will benefit me in my postgraduate study. Besides, I would like to express my gratitude to my friends and classmates who support and trust me all the time. Every time when I feel desperate, they would accompany me without any complaint. When I think of them, I feel so lucky to have those people who love me so much. Furthermore, I want to express my sincere gratitude to my families. They have offered me great growing environment, brought up me with appropriate educational methods and given me space to be myself. Last but not least, I greatly appreciate my college, in which I obtained a great deal of knowledge that very useful and practical in my daily life and study.

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