



Understanding Humor Based on the Incongruity Theory and the Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

Humor plays a crucial role in social interactions; sometimes it is even named as social coping mechanism. People have been working on humor since Plato and Aristotle times and different theories have thus come into being, among which the incongruity theory is considered most influential. This article combines the incongruity theory and a pragmatic principle — the Cooperative Principle (CP) set by H. P. Grice, to explain how humor is generated and perceived in certain context. The analysis shows that people produce humor not just for humor's sake. Mostly, they want to express an additional message or implicature in Grice's term. Following Grice's particularized conversational implicatures generated when conversational maxims of the CP are flouted by participants to convey extra information, the paper terms humor out of exploiting maxims as particularized conversational humor. Detailed analyses of examples of humor have been conducted to elucidate how humor is generated through flouting conversational maxims of the CP and what implicature is put across.

Key words: Humor; Cooperative principle; Incongruity theory

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INTRODUCTION

The term "humor" has its origin in the Latin word which means fluid or moisture. According to Renaissance physiology, there are four basic humors or fluids in human body: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The proportion between these four humors is assumed to play a major role in determining a person's temperament. A person with the four humors in balance is regarded as good humor whereas a person with any kind of imbalance is considered as out of humor (McGhee, 1979). For centuries, the term "humor" has been referring to one's mood or state of mind in a general sense. In the sixteenth century, Ben Jonson introduced the term "humor" into the field of art to refer to a person's peculiarity, absurdity and folly. Not until the eighteenth century, did "humor" become an aesthetic term that was invested with the present meaning, that is, to reflect something aesthetic in a ridiculous way.

Humor can bring about marvelous amusement. In social interactions, humor is treated as a lubricant since it can help ease social tensions, convey friendly intent, and strengthen social bonds. This article approaches humor by combining the Cooperative Principle (CP) in pragmatics and the incongruity theory in philosophy to investigate how humor is generated and try to explain the mechanism behind. The paper will first explain what humor is, then introduce the CP and the incongruity theory, and on the basis of those two theories humor has been explored through examples.

1. EXPLORATIONS OF HUMOR

1.1 What is Humor?

Though we may realize humor when we meet it, it is not easy to define it. Innumerable definitions of humor have been advanced since Plato times, but no agreement has been reached. McGhee (1979) believes that humor does

not exist in the real world but only exists in one's mind and it is only measurable in terms of one's assessment. He defines humor as "a form of intellectual play" (McGhee, 1979, p.42). Some people identify humor with joking. However, the two are quite different in that the former makes humor a medium to serve the speaker's purpose, such as reflecting social reality or getting the hearer perform certain actions while the latter is merely recreational. In this paper, humor is tentatively defined as one's evaluation of events or utterances as ridiculous and witty.

Humor is constituted of humorist, stimulus, recipient, and reaction. Originally people who possessed too much of one of the four humors were objects of laughter and ridicule and referred to as humorists. Once the connection is made, the term extends to anyone who is highly skilled at producing ridiculous, amusing or absurd ideas and events. The humorist may identify with the speaker. But when a humorous event is told in the third person, the humorist and the speaker will become two distinct entities. Stimulus of humor takes many forms. Not only the event itself, but the organization of the event and the speaker's presenting manner can all give rise to humor. The stimulus of one humorous event may vary with different recipients. For example:

(1) During an exercise, a commander's jeep got stuck in mud. The commander saw several soldiers around, so he asked them for help. But one of the soldiers replied, "According to the regulations, we are dead now and shouldn't take part in any action". The commander turned to his driver, "Go there and put some corpses under the wheels. It seems to be the only way to get the vehicle out".

All the soldiers instantly jumped up!

To some people, the commander's wit may serve as the stimulus of humor while to some people the soldiers are ridiculous because their action apparently contradicts their words and they are satirized for their idleness. The recipient of humor refers to the person who can comprehend essence of humor. Recognition of humor largely depends on the audience. Only when the recipient gets enjoyment from an event which is being told, can the humorist or speaker gains delight. Laughter is assumed to be a reliable index that someone has found something absurd. Just as McGhee (1979) says: "the more intense and extended the laughter, the greater the level of appreciation experienced" (p.25). At times, the recipient's reactions can also be verbal remarks such as "It's interesting/funny" or a combination of both nonverbal and verbal expressions.

1.2 The Incongruity Theory

Explorations of humor by philosophers can trace back to Plato and Aristotle times. There are many theories of humor which attempt to explain what humor is, what social function it fulfills, and why it is humorous. Various classical theories of humor have been put

forward since then; however, three are most popular: relief theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004). Although it's hardly possible to account for every attribute of every kind of humor simultaneously with one theory due to complexity and multi-facet of humor, among the three theories, incongruity theory occupies a dominant position and is considered most influential and most powerful (Raskin, 1985).

Incongruity is regarded as "something unexpected, out of context, inappropriate, unreasonable, illogical, exaggerated and so forth" (McGhee, 1979, p.10). Proponents of the incongruity theory argue that incongruity is at the core of all humor. They hold that humor is recognized at the perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought to be in some relation to the concept (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002). However, the crucial point of the incongruity theory is not the incongruity itself, but "the congruous resolution of the apparent incongruity that makes a certain situation funny. That is why we speak of the incongruity-resolution theory" (Mulder & Nijholt, 2002, p.4).

The forgoing analysis suggests that generation and perception of humor is heavily dependent on context. On the one hand, no conversations including humorous talk exchanges can occur in vacuum, i.e. devoid of context. On the other, incongruous elements of an event or utterance can only be harmonized in the local context. In example (1), the soldier's action leads to incongruity because "dead people" are impossible to speak and stand up. But their absurd action gets resolved since only according to the rule of the military exercise, they are assumed to be dead. Once their life is threatened, the safety naturally becomes the first consideration rather than rules in the simulated military exercise. Thus, incongruity becomes coordinated.

2. THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

In 1967, H. P. Grice, in his paper "Logic and Conversation" originally presented at Harvard University, put forward a set of rules which he believed that people in conversation were expected to follow and he named them the Cooperative Principle (CP). Later, the paper got printed in Cole & Morgan (1975) and with slight revisions was reprinted in *Studies in the Way of Words* (1989). Lindblom (2009) in his paper cites the final version as he assumes that this is the one Grice considered most complete. Likewise, the 1989 version is taken as reference in this paper.

Grice (1989) formulates the CP in this way: "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" (p. 26) He generalizes four maxims from the CP which

he names them respectively as quantity, quality, manner, and relation maxims. Grice assumes that participants in conversation normally follow these maxims and try to cooperate with each other to achieve a successful communication. However, he found that in some situations people did not observe the maxims. Grice describes four situations in which people tend to violate the maxims. What has been discussed fully and has attracted most attention is the last one: “flouting or exploiting a maxim for the purpose of implicating information (implicature)” (Lindblom, 2009, p.153). Yule (2000) points out: “Most of the time, our conversations take place in very specific contexts in which locally recognized inferences are assumed. Such inferences are required to work out the conveyed meanings which result from particularized conversational implicatures” (p.42).

When people produce humorous utterances, they do not tend to be humorous merely for the sake of humor. Generally, they create humor to convey additional information — implicature. Following particularized conversational implicatures, humor, which can only be perceived by drawing information from the local context, is called particularized conversational humor in this paper.

3. PARTICULARIZED CONVERSATIONAL HUMOR

There are two types of particularized humor: One is that the speaker flouts the maxims to produce humor; the other is that the hearer intentionally misinterprets what the speaker has said. Particularized humor possesses those qualities that characterize implicatures, that is, calculability, cancellability, non-detachability, and indeterminacy (Grice, 1989). Calculability means that every conversational implicature can be worked out and deduced step by step. There’s no doubt that humor can be perceived; otherwise we won’t experience it. It is through linguistic clues, contextual cues and harmonization of incongruity that humor is worked out. Once additional linguistic expressions or clauses or a change in context is made, the conversational implicature can be cancelled. In example (1), if the soldier’s words have been changed into the following: “According to the regulations, we are dead now, but we are certainly alive and are able to do things. OK, we’ll help you”, humor then will disappear instantly. However, humor doesn’t rely on a single word; instead it resides in content co-constructed by all the linguistic elements involved. Thus, replacing the words of the utterance with synonyms won’t detach humor from utterances. And it is very likely that a story which elicits laughter from some audience may not seem funny at all to other audiences, which shows the property of indeterminacy. We are going to use more examples to show how humor can be analyzed through a combination of the incongruity theory and the cooperative principle.

3.1 Humor out of Flouting Quantity Maxim

The maxim of quantity requires the speaker to “provide as much information as required” (Grice, 1989, p.28). But in reality, the speaker may intentionally behave in the opposite way. For example:

(2) Malborn sat in his attorney’s office. “Do you want the bad news first or the terrible news first?” the lawyer asked.

“Give me the bad news first.”

“Your wife found a picture worth half-million dollars.”

“That’s the bad news?” asked Malborn incredulously. “I can’t wait to hear the terrible news.”

“The terrible news is that it’s of you and your secretary.”

The attorney needs to tell Malborn that the affair between him and his secretary has been uncovered by his wife and the incident has to be settled at half-million dollars, but then the attorney could not embarrass his client while trying to give the relevant information. Under such circumstances, humorous utterances serve the purpose. The attorney intentionally avoids telling Malborn what kind of picture his wife has found; instead he only says “a picture” to give Malborn a vague idea. Though what he has said is seemingly incongruous with “bad news”, he does this on purpose again because he intends to mislead Malborn and makes Malborn himself ask for the terrible news. In this way the attorney’s scheme (intentional violation of quantity maxim plus purposefully-made incongruity) not only gives rise to humor but helps him realize his purpose.

Flouting the maxim of quantity involves two circumstances: providing inadequate information and giving more information than required. Example (2) has shown how the insufficient information gives rise to humor while the following example helps explain how unnecessary information produces humor.

(3) I became somewhat excited at my son’s high school football games. One night, when he made a particular good tackle, I punched the person next to me and loudly exclaimed, “That’s my son who made that tackle.”

“I know”, she replied quietly, “He’s my son too.”

From the conversation, we can safely infer that the speaker and the hearer must be husband and wife. To the wife, the husband gives unnecessary information because the wife certainly knows who the boy is. But the irrationality can be resolved by the local contextual cues, that is, the husband is too thrilled to forget who is sitting beside him. The wife knows the situation clearly; however, she keeps calm and gives back more information on purpose. In this way, humor is generated.

3.2 Humor out of Flouting Quality Maxim

The maxim of quality requires the speaker to commit himself to the truth and “not to say what is false” (Grice, 1989, p.28). In humorous talk exchange, the speaker may exaggerate some realities to achieve comical effect

through which s/he puts across the intended message. For example:

(4) A person, recently deceased, approached the Pearly Gate. After exchanging pleasantries with St. Peter, he asked him what all those clocks in the room were for. Peter said there was one clock for each human being living on earth, and they represented the amount of time each person had left to live on earth. The deceased noticed that some clocks ran faster than others, and asked Peter why some clock hands were moving faster than others. Peter replied that when someone tells a lie, the hands will move faster thus shortening the lifespan of that particular liar. The deceased wondered where his boss' clock was located, Peter said he keeps that one in the back room and uses it as a ceiling fan.

Common sense tells us a clock cannot be used as a ceiling fan no matter how fast clock hands move. St. Peter certainly knows this, too. Nevertheless, he intentionally overstates the facts, i.e. he is flouting the maxim of quality. But if we refer back to St. Peter's interpretations of the clocks, we can find explanation for the oddity — he is implying that the boss has lied too much!

The most apparent violation of quality maxim is that the speaker contradicts himself. This can be seen clearly in the following example:

(5) A newly-wedded couple quarreled. At last she said with tears. "I don't want to have anything to do with you any more. I'm packing up my things and going off to my mother."

"Fine, my dear," said the husband. "Here are the traveling expenses."

She counted the money. "What about the money for the return?"

The wife claimed that she would leave her husband forever and go to her mother's. But when her husband gives her traveling expenses, she even asks for the return money. Thus she is contradictory with what she has just said. The incongruity reveals that she is unwilling to leave. It's for sure that the seemingly ridiculous request will bring the couple to good relations again. This, to some extent, reveals the power of humor — dispelling tension and consolidating interpersonal relationship.

3.3 Humor out of Flouting Relation Maxim

The maxim of relation is explained rather simply, namely, to be relevant to the ongoing talk exchange (Grice, 1989). But in the following example, the psychiatrist's remarks are not pertinent to the man's requirement.

(6) "It was horrible," the man was telling his psychiatrist. "While I was in Japan on business, I wired my wife that I'd be back a day early. I rushed home from the airport and found her alone with my best friend. How could she do this to me?"

"Well," answered the shrink, "maybe she didn't get your telegram!"

In fact, the man is complaining and seeking comfort

from his psychiatrist about his wife's disloyalty. The psychiatrist certainly understands his client's intentions, but he intentionally ignores the question "How could she do this to me" and only gives an irrelevant response "maybe she didn't get your telegram". What should be noted is that the response is not totally irrelevant if we refer back to the talk exchange because the man did mention that he sent a telegram to his wife telling her that his return date would be a day ahead of schedule. By making use of humor, the psychiatrist escapes from the trouble of dealing with the thorny issue. If he were really serious about the matter, it would be hard for him to give counseling.

3.4 Humor out of Flouting Manner Maxim

According to Grice (1989), what one says in communication should be as clear as possible. This maxim can hardly be observed fully because ambiguity is a common language phenomenon. Nevertheless, when put in certain context, most ambiguous utterances can become disambiguated. At times, the hearer may deliberately distort what the speaker has said to convey extra message. For example:

(7) A newly-married couple were entertaining and among the guests was one whose conduct was rather flippant. At supper he held up on his fork a piece of meat which had been served him, and in a vein of intended humor, remarked, "Is this a pig?"

"To which end of the fork do you refer?" asked an old man sitting at the other end of the table.

In the local context there are two entities that can be referred to by "this". One is the flippant man; the other is the meat. The old man knows clearly that the flippant man is referring to the meat. But he wants to puncture the man's arrogance; so he invests the deictic term "this" with the entity "the man" instead of "the meat".

Sometimes, the speaker makes use of fuzzy borderline between lexical meanings to generate humor and achieve personal purpose. For example:

(8) Several weeks after a young man had been hired, he was called into the personnel director's office.

"What is the meaning of this?" the director asked. "When you applied for the job, you told us you had five years' experience. Now we discover this is the first job you ever held."

"Well," the young man said, "in your advertisement you said you wanted somebody with imagination."

Most linguistic expressions have more than one sense. In the job advertisement, "imagination" is supposed to mean "creativity"; however, imagination can also mean "fantasy and ability to imagine" in other contexts. It's hard to draw a clear line between these two meanings if devoid of the specific context. But in this dialogue, imagination occurs on a job notice, and it can be understood by almost all applicants that imagination means originality. The employee is surely capable of reaching the intended

meaning. But in order to justify his behavior and shake possible blame from the boss, he gives the response by taking advantage of the fuzzy line between “creativity” and “fantasy” of “imagination”.

CONCLUSION

It is assumed that speakers and listeners involved in conversation are generally cooperating with each other, that is, communicative parties will basically observe the Cooperative Principle (CP). However, when a person is trying to give additional information and is not deliberately making trouble in social interactions, s/he may not fully adhere to CP and its four maxims. Humorous talk exchanges can be generated in this way. Although humor is a linguistic phenomenon, given its complexity it's far from enough to explain it solely with linguistic theories. In this paper, production and recognition of humor in communication is explained on a combined basis of the CP and the incongruity theory. But this is by no means the only possible combination between a theory on humor and a linguistic principle. Humor can also be approached from other pragmatic aspects, such as deixis, presupposition, and speech act. Moreover, being a

complicated and pervasive linguistic phenomenon, humor needs a more comprehensive and systematic study.

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