A Study of English Humor from the Perspective of Pragmatics

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Abstract. Humor is an indispensible feature for English conversations. As a special feature in language use, humor can be approached and interpreted with the help of pragmatic theories. This paper attempts to analyze English humors and make readers more capable in the understanding and production of English humors.

Introduction
Humor plays an important role in our life — it can bring us laughter, relax our state of mind, provoke our thinking, improve our understanding of life, to name just a few. However, there are many situations where we cannot fully appreciate humor. In this paper, we try to probe into the nature of humor from a pragmatic point of view based on the four major theories in pragmatics: the Cooperative Principle, deixis, presupposition, and the Speech Act Theory.

Cooperative Principle and Humor
The Cooperative Principle was proposed by Paul Grice to explain the fact that in daily conversations people do not usually say things directly but tend to imply them. The secret to humor lies in its indirectness, which makes it more intriguing. So we can adopt the Cooperative Principle in the interpretation of some English humors.

According to Grice [1], the Cooperative Principle has a general principle (Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the exchange in which you are engaged), and four maxims are generated from the general principle:
① The Maxim of Quantity.
② The Maxim of Quality.
③ The Maxim of Relevance.
④ The Maxim of Manner.

The violation of these cooperative maxims can produce humorous effect. We will analyze the four aspects one by one with examples.

Violation of the Maxim of Quantity
(a) A: What’s the best thing to do to keep from getting lost in the woods?
B: Stay in your room.
A asks B how to avoid getting lost in the woods. However, B doesn’t provide enough information. Of course, if you “stay in your room”, you will never get lost. B intentionally violates the Maxim of Quantity, thus producing humorous effect. But we should not consider B’s answer as nonsense, because by answering this way, B implies that there is no way to avoid getting lost in the woods or at least he can provide no better solution than “stay in your room”.

(b) The Soprano: Did you notice how my voice filled the hall last night?
The Contralto: Yes, in fact, I noticed several people leaving to make room for it.
Here C violates the Maxim of Quantity by giving more information than is required by S. S is proud of her voice and eager to get compliment from others. C satisfies S’s vanity by saying “Yes”, but she goes on to say that “I noticed several people leaving to make room for it”, which, in fact, is not a compliment but implies that S’s performance was so terrible that the audience had to leave.

**Violation of the Maxim of Quantity**

(c) One winter morning, an employee explained why he had shown up for work one hour late. “It was so slippery outside that for every step I took ahead, I slipped back two.”

The boss eyed him suspiciously. “Oh, yeah? Then how did you ever get here?”

“I finally gave up and started for home.”

Obviously, the employee’s excuse for being late violates the Maxim of Quality by saying something he himself believes to be false. But after his further explanation, we realize that the employee is really clever — he speaks in this way in order to distract the boss’s attention from blaming him to demanding a reasonable justification for his “foolish” lies. If you were the boss, how could you keep the anger and blame your employee after such a humorous conversation?

(d) Once a boy went into a barber’s shop. He asked for a shave. The barber told him to sit down, soaped his face and then left. The boy waited and waited and at last he lost his patience.

“Well”, he shouted, “why are you leaving me here all this time?”

The barber replied, “I’m waiting for your beard to grow.”

The boy is eager to imitate adults, and asks the barber to shave for him. But the barber doesn’t turn him down directly. Instead, he asks the boy to sit down and wait. However, it is common sense that little boys cannot grow beard until their late teens. The barber violates the Maxim of Quality by telling something untruthful, intending to teach his little customer that he is too young to shave beard.

**Violation of the Maxim of Relevance**

(e) “Professor,” said the old graduate at the class reunion, “now that I’ve made a lot of money, I want to do something for the dear old school. Let’s see now, in what studies did I excel?”

“As I remember, sir, in my class you slept most of the time.”

“Fine! Good suggestion! I’ll build a dormitory!”

The professor is put into a dilemma: on one hand, he cannot tell lies in front of his former students; on the other hand, he still wants to save the student’s face in front of his old classmates. The professor succeeds in answering the question both politely and truthfully by his intentional violation of the Maxim of Relevance. In terms of relevance, the performance in class (sleeping) has no direct relation with the excellence in studies. What makes this conversation more ironic is that the old graduate immediately promises to build a dormitory for the school because sleeping is what he did best in school! So we can perceive the sense of humor and wisdom of both speakers in this interaction. The best humor should be interactive, that is, both parties of the conversation are able to not only produce but also understand humorous messages.

**Violation of the Maxim of Manner**

(f) A: When do you think in man’s life he doesn’t understand a woman?
B: In my opinion, there are two periods.
A: Indeed, and what are they?
B: Before and after marriage.

Though his answer is obscure and indirect, we can get B’s idea that a man never understands a woman. Then what is his intention of violating the Maxim of Manner? Let’s observe the situation in this way: if he answers directly that a man never understands a woman, it seems that he is being too abrupt and absolute. So he divides a man’s life into two periods, that is, “before marriage” and “after marriage”. In this manner, it seems that his conclusion is based on philosophical thinking, thus more convincing and humorous.
Deixis and Humor

Deixis are linguistic expressions, which can point to or indicate things or people. They cannot be understood without reference to context. According to referential content, deixis can be put into person deixis, place deixis, time deixis and discourse deixis. Because of their relative obscurity, deixis are used to create humorous effect.

Person Deixis and Humor

(g) A bald man took a seat in a beauty shop.
“How can I help you?” asked the stylist.
“I went for a hair transplant, but I couldn’t stand the pain. If you can make my hair look like yours without causing any discomfort, I’ll pay you 5000 dollars.”
“No problem,” said the stylist, and she quickly shaved her head.
The person deixis “yours” here means “your hair”, but generally speaking, there are three ways to make the bald man’s hair and the stylist’s hair look alike: ① To change the bald man’s hair (the bald man’s intention). ② To change the stylist’s hair (the stylist’s courageous action). ③ To change both of the two person’s hair. The bald man loses his 5000 dollars because of his use of the obscure deictic expression “yours”. If he expresses exactly what kind of hairstyle he desires, the stylist won’t have the opportunity to take advantage of him.

Place Deixis and Humor

(h) A: Excuse me, where should I get off to go to Hyde Park?
B: Just see where I get off, for it’s the one after yours.
The prepositional phrase “after yours” is a relative notion, so A cannot determine where to get off until he knows where B gets off. This is absurd in this context, because nobody will choose to get off at the next stop and then goes back to find his destination and B hasn’t given enough information about where A should get off to go to Hyde Park. A may continue the conversation with a further question or turn to another fellow passenger for help.

Time Deixis and Humor

(i) A: I cannot pay the rent this month.
B: But you said that last month.
A: I kept my word, didn’t I?
This conversation is a bit complicated to analyze, because the interpretation of the two time deixis “last month” and “this month” depend on the particular contexts (the relevant utterance time) and it is easy to get confused by them. Here, I’ll try to solve the problem by assuming a specific time. Suppose the month in which this conversation takes place is June, then “last month” means May. It’s quite clear that when A said “I cannot pay the rent this month.” in May, A meant that he couldn’t pay the rent in May. But in June, when B quoted A’s words in May to ask A to pay the rent, B should say “You said that you couldn’t pay the rent last month and I allowed it. But this month you have to pay it. I cannot bear any more delay!” so that A will not be able to play on the words to delay his payment. In most occasions humor can make you appear more intelligent and attractive, but if you intentionally play other people with humor, that’s like practical jokes, unacceptable and offensive.

Discourse Deixis and Humor

(j) A: I dreamed a wonderful dream last night. I got 100 in English. Do you know what it means?
B: Yes, I think I know. It means that you studied hard in your dream.
In this conversation, “it” refers to different things for the two speakers. A’s intention is to ask if B knows what “getting 100 in English means for him”, while B mistakes “it” for “getting 100 in English in a dream”. Naturally, B’s implication is that dreaming about getting 100 is nothing and A should study hard to get 100 in real life!
Presupposition and Humor

Prepositions are what is taken by the speaker to be the common ground of the participants in the conversation [2]. But sometimes what the speaker believes to be the common ground is not within the hearer’s knowledge, and then the humorous effect evolves. Let’s see the following example.

(k) A: I heard you got married three months ago. How do you like it?
B: I’m sick of marriage. Bill hasn’t kissed me since I came back from my honeymoon.
A: Why don’t you divorce him?
B: Oh, I’m not married to Bill.

When B mentions her relationship with Bill, she assumes that A knows that Bill is her lover. However, A does not. What’s more, when A picks up the topic of marriage, he naturally believes that B will talk about her relationship with her husband and Bill must be B’s husband. So when B complains about Bill’s different attitudes to B before and after marriage, A suggests divorce. The far distance between reality and what’s believed to be reality renders this conversation humorous.

(l) Novelist Julian Hawthorn was frequently mistaken for his father, the celebrated author Nathaniel Hawthorn. Once when he was introduced to a woman, she gushed.

“Mr. Hawthorn, I just finished reading The Scarlet Letter, and I think it’s a masterpiece. I had no ideas that you were so gifted.”

“Oh, that,” said Julian with a deprecatory shrug. “That was written when I was only 4 years old.”

In her utterance, the woman first praised the book The Scarlet Letter, and then commented that Julian was gifted. Obviously, her presupposition is that Julian Hawthorn is the author of the book. By answering “that was written when I was only four years old”, Julian admitted the truthful side of the situation without correcting the woman’s mistake. Of course, the woman will immediately realize her mistake and appreciate Julian’s sense of humor in not pointing out her mistake directly.

Speech Act Theory and Humor

In linguistic communication, people do not merely exchange information. They actually do something through talking or writing in various circumstances. Actions performed via speaking are called speech acts [3], which can be further divided into direct speech acts and indirect speech acts. Indirect speech acts are those in which there is no correspondence between a structure and a function, so the hearers or readers have to infer the indirect meaning from literal meaning. However, there is no universal law underlying the interpretation of indirect speech acts, so sometimes, misinterpretation will bring about humorous effect.

(m) Customer: Waiter, there is a hair in my soup.
Waiter: Blond or red? We are missing a waitress.

C is complaining about the quality of the soup by using indirect speech acts. However, W pretends not to understand C’s indirect speech acts and only takes them as their literal meaning. In his response, W also uses overstatement to make the embarrassing situation humorous.

Summary

Based on the above analysis, the violation of the cooperative maxims, misunderstanding of the use of deixis, mistake of presupposition and misinterpretation of indirect speech acts can create humorous effect. Understanding the pragmatics involved in humor study can help us participate creatively in social interactions.

References