

# **An Analysis of Verbal Humor in American Sitcoms Triggered by Violating the Politeness Principle -- Taking *Modern Family* as an Example**

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## **Abstract**

As an American sitcom, *Modern Family* has many dialogues that embody verbal humor and are popular with audiences and English learners. From the perspective of politeness principle, this paper analyzes the humorous dialogue in the first season of modern family, and selects 6 examples for specific interpretation, so as to explain how the play achieves the humorous effect of sitcom from violating the maxims of tact, generosity, approbation, modesty, agreement and sympathy.

**Key words:** politeness principle; verbal humor; *Modern Family*; sitcom

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research Background

In recent years, the exchanges and cooperation in the fields of politics, economy and culture have become increasingly frequent. Good international cooperation is inseparable from successful verbal communication. However, due to the cultural differences between countries, people in different countries will inevitably be embarrassed when communicating. Humorous language is the essence of human language and fully embodies the infinite wisdom of mankind. Humorous discourse cannot only resolve the awkward atmosphere and save the face of both sides of communication, but also relieve people's anxiety and tension when they face and adapt to today's fast-paced life. What's more, humorous utterances can provide a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere for both sides of the communication, so as to shorten the psychological distance between the two sides of the communication, increase the sense of amiability and consolidate the interpersonal relationship. Therefore, humor plays an indispensable role in people's daily life.

In this background, more and more English movies and TV series are introduced to Chinese audiences due to the worldwide communication and rapid Internet development. Among them, sitcom is one of the most popular forms. It was warmly welcomed, especially by the younger generation. However, although there are scripts that can help Chinese audiences understand the content of scenes in sitcoms, they still can't fully understand the meaning, which is an inevitable problem for audiences of different cultural backgrounds. The politeness principle proposed by Leech is very applicable to the cause of humorous speech in sitcoms.

### 1.2 Research Purpose and Significance

In recent decades, more and more foreign sitcoms have become popular. People living in the fast-paced society treat watching TV serials as one of the leisure activities to get relaxed and reduce the stress, their increasingly high demand of entertaining of the content of TV serials especially the sitcoms can be met in the satisfactory way. Under the background of pursuing the enjoyment of entertain by the mass, those TV dramas which are able to bring the audience spiritual enjoyment can be listed as the favorite one among all the types of TV plays appearing on the TV. The reason why sitcoms are so popular is that the verbal humor in the characters' dialogues plays a great role. Many witty and clever dialogues express vivid implication by violating the principle of politeness, and the humorous effect is self-evident. Many of the humorous conversational scenes in modern family are caused by violations of the politeness principle.

Usually, people follow the politeness principle to save face, but sometimes they like to deliberately violate the politeness principle to create verbal humor. Especially in western countries, due to the concept that people in western culture are born equal, communication between different groups is more free and unrestrained than that in eastern civilization. The conversational communication in the American sitcom *modern family* often creates unique humorous effects by violating the politeness principle.

This paper shows the function and effect that the violation of politeness principle has on humor generation in sitcoms. This shows that the Politeness Principle contributes a lot to the understanding

and explanation of humor, and is consistent with previous studies. Scholars can make further researches on humor based on this principle. Practically, the researches on humor based on politeness principle help the audiences have a better understanding of the humor in sitcoms, and learn how humor is generated, thus getting more pleasure when appreciating sitcoms. Also, since the politeness principle is important in humor generation, people can make use of these two principles in their daily communication, which makes the communication more humorous and more smoothly.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 The definition of humor**

To know the term "humor" thoroughly, we need first to know its definition. The endeavor to study humor has never ceased before. It is hard to reach consensus to define humor. There has no a comprehensive or uniform definition of humor. Attardo(1994) points out that the definition of what humor is ultimately depends on the purpose for which it is used.

Etymologically, the term "humor" came into use from Latin, it has the meaning of "moisture" or "fluid" flowing in human's body and in charge of the mood, and that is the primary meaning of humor. In Western countries, the related study of origin of humor began from the ancient Greek. As in Plato's term, humor is a mixed feeling of the soul (Piddington, 1933), something about humor's meaning can be concluded from which that humor arises from pleasure and pain, two contrastive feelings. When we find something laughable, we laugh and we show envy as well, which comes from the pain of soul, and laughter, which comes from the form of pleasure at the same time. In that way, humor is the mixture of pain and pleasure. In *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1997), humor is defined as: The quality of being amusing or comic; the ability to appreciate things, situations or people that are comic; person's state of mind which is cheerful, happy and pleasant, or the unhappy and unpleasant. Lin Yutang first translated "humor" into Chinese in early 20th century. He maintains that "humor is a popular art form to express one viewpoint and even perceptions of the real world"(Hu, 1987) .

From the above explanations of humor, it is known that, humor is primarily treated as something to do with a mixture and combined feelings.

The charm of humor is largely known by most people, which has been enjoyed and appreciated all around the world. Its attraction lies in the laughter and happiness it offers to people. Being able to make the atmosphere more pleasant and relax is the most important characteristic of humor. It has always been a hot topic and many scholars from different fields have conducted many researches on it especially over the past few decades.

### **2.2 Recent studies on Humor**

Humor, as a popular research topic, has been studied in various fields. As for the pragmatic field, some theories like the speech act theory, Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, relevance theory, presupposition theory, or context theory are used to analyze the generation of humor (Wang, 2011). Many researchers have done researches on humor analysis from the perspective of the Politeness Principle.

Chiaro(1992) explores the pragmatics of word play and examines the narrative structures of various joke forms. She focuses particularly on the socio-cultural contexts for the production and reception of jokes by examining the extent to which jokes are both universal in their appeal, and yet specific to a particular culture.

Norricks(1993) investigates humor in conversation of its various forms such as punning, allusion, and joking. He views joke-telling, punning and teasing in relation to power, solidarity, and social distance, with the aim of explaining how joking can express aggression and yet still build a rapport.

In China, many scholars applied the linguistic theories to the study of language humor from the early 1980s.

There are also some researches on verbal humor from the perspective of Cooperative Principle and politeness principle. Tian(2015) analyzes the humorous examples in *Surprise* which violate each maxim of the Politeness Principle, and concludes that the violation of the Politeness Principle can have a surprising effect for the audiences, thus attracting their attention and producing humorous effect. Wei (2013) analyzes the humor in *Friends* and concludes that the Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle are the main source of humor. She also proposes that the Cooperative Principle can better explain humor than Politeness Principle, and males are more likely to violate the Politeness Principle for humorous effect.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Goffman(1967) proposed the concept of "face". He believes that people have two kinds of face: one is positive face, which means people hope their personality, career, hobbies, clothing and so on will be praised by others; the other is negative face, which means people their personal, property, freedom of movement and so on will not be violated by others. On this basis, Leach believes that politeness should also be divided into two types: one is positive, that is, to meet the positive requirements of the other party's face (such as praising the other party's occupation, position, achievement, appearance, children, etc.); the other is negative Politeness, that is, to meet the low-level requirements of the other party's face (such as try not to violate the other party's personal, property, freedom, etc.).

Leech proposed the principle of politeness on the basis of the "face" theory including six principles:

1) *Tact Maxim:*

- a. *Minimize cost to other,*
- b. *Maximize benefit to other.*

2) *Generosity Maxim:*

- a. *Minimize benefit to self,*
- b. *Maximize cost to self.*

3) *Approbation Maxim:*

- a. *Minimize dispraise of other,*
- b. *Maximize praise of other.*

4) *Modesty Maxim:*

- a. Minimize praise of self,
  - b. Maximize dispraise of self.
- 5) Agreement Maxim:
- a. Minimize disagreement between self and other,
  - b. Maximize agreement between self and other.
- 6) Sympathy Maxim:
- a. Minimize antipathy between self and other,
  - b. Maximize sympathy between self and other.
- (Leech, 1983)

Among the six maxims, tact maxim and modesty maxim, approbation maxim and modesty maxim are paired respectively. Tact maxim and generosity maxim are both used for instructions and commitments, but tact maxim considers benefits and costs of others. Both illocutionary acts, instructions and commitments, involve an action that involves both self and others, and the relationship between costs to self and benefit to other, or between costs to other and benefits to self, is directly proportional.

Approbation maxim is considered from the perspective of the hearer, while modesty maxim is considered from the perspective of the speaker. And the basis of these two maxims is not "benefit" and "cost", but "praise" and "dispraise".

Agreement maxim and sympathy maxim are not related to each other.

The maxims of politeness principle are not equal. Among them, the tact maxim is more important, which is the most fundamental. This is because the tact maxim is used for instruction, and instruction is the most polite behavior among all kinds of illocutionary behaviors. Therefore, the tact maxim is the most widely used and indispensable maxim. In fact, "tact" is the root of politeness. Using language politely means using language tactfully.

#### **4. An Analysis of Verbal Humor violating the politeness principle in *Modern Family***

##### **4.1 A Brief Introduction to *Modern Family***

*Modern family* tells a story about a big family composed of three different American families: an ordinary couple Claire and Phil and three children, a homosexual couple Cam and Mitch adopted their adopted daughter Lily from Vietnam, and 60 year old Jay married a young Colombian beauty Gloria. This paper is mainly based on Jay and Gloria's dialogues. Jay Pritchett is the father of Claire, Mitchell and Joe, Manny's stepfather, Gloria's husband, children's grandfather. He is a rich old man who owns his own cabinet business. Jay, 60, married Gloria as the second wife. She is sexy and has a strong accent. She has an independent mind and personality, adheres to her own tradition, loves her sons, and is devoted to Jay. She is a good wife and mother.

##### **4.2 Humor Produced by Violating the Politeness Principle**

According to Leech, people follow some maxims in the actual communication out of politeness to keep harmonious relationship. However, in most of the daily situations, people would rather

sacrifice politeness principle and appear impolite to create humor. Now we will look at each conditions according to which concrete maxim the cases violates.

#### 4.2.1 Humor Produced by Violating the Tact Maxim

In Leech's Politeness Principle, the tact maxim requires the speaker to minimize the cost to others, that is, to maximize the benefit to others. However, in sitcoms, the characters don't always follow the tact maxim to keep polite, because they have close relationship, and the humorous effect is produced in this way. Here are some examples.

Example 1:

*Mitchell: Anyway, um, so, about- about a year ago, Cam and I started feeling this longing, you know, for something more, like, uh, maybe a baby?*

*Jay: Ooh, that's a bad idea.*

*Mitchell: What do you mean, "Bad idea"?*

*Jay: Well, kids need a mother. I mean if you two guys are bored, get a dog.*

*Mitchell: Okay, we're not bored, Dad.*

*Gloria: I support you, Mitchell, even though you're not my son.*

In this example, Mitchell and Camron adopted an 8-month-old girl baby in Vietnam. Mitchell is going to announce their adoption at the family party. Jay has always resisted Mitchell's same-sex marriage, let alone their adoption. Jay expressed his attitude very directly, almost refuting every sentence. This violates the tact maximum of minimizing the cost to the heater. Mitchell is so angry that he can't come up with tough words to refute. But the audiences know that although Jay' words offend Mitchell, he still loves Mitchell. He does not say it in a more polite way. So the violation of the tact maxim makes the conversation so humorous to the audiences.

#### 4.2.2 Humor Produced by Violating the Generosity Maxim

The generosity maxim requires the speaker to minimize benefit to himself. That is to say, to maximize cost to himself. More attention is paid to the speaker himself in this maxim. In actual life, people always act as the generosity maxim requires and are polite. However, in sitcoms, the characters always violate the generosity maxim to generate humorous effect.

Example 2:

*Phil: I need to rest my face.*

*Jay: You're fine. You'll be all right. Hang on.*

*Claire: Oh, my God!*

*Jay: Get the door.*

*Claire: Ah! Dad?*

*Jay: Little accident. Nothing big.*

*Phil: I was in a plane crash.*

*Claire: What happened?*

*Jay: We were threading the needle, and somebody moved. No, I didn't. You did it on purpose.*

*Jay: That's the painkiller talking. He's a little loopy.*

*Gloria: How bad is it?*

*Jay: Well, the wing is cracked, the propeller's bent, but I can- I can- -*

*Gloria: I mean Phil.*

*Phil: I was in a plane crash.*

*Claire: Thanks, Dad.*

*Jay: I didn't ask him to be there. He insisted. He took a chance. This is what happened.*

*Claire: Kind of like the time you ran over his foot.*

*Many: You ran over his foot?*

*Jay: That was an accident.*

*Claire: You know, Dad, you did it on purpose.*

In this example, Phil is hit in the face by Jay's plane, and Jay takes him home to rest. When Claire asks what happened, Jay says it is a small thing, not serious, and Phil is responsible for the accident, which has nothing to do with him. In the face of Gloria's inquiry about the accident, Jay begins to say about his plane. But Gloria is actually asking Phil. Phil also exaggerates that he was in a plane crash. Both of them violate the generosity maxim. The generosity maxim requires the speaker to minimize benefit to himself and maximize cost to himself, but in Jay and Phil's words, they both want to argue for their own benefit. Their argument is not polite, but is very humorous to the audiences.

#### 4.2.3 Humor Produced by Violating the Approbation Maxim

The approbation maxim means that the speaker should minimize dispraise of others and maximize praise of others. Since praise is the lubricant of human relationships, people usually follow the approbation maxim in their everyday life. However, in sitcoms, to create humorous effect, the characters usually violate the approbation maxim. This brings lots of laughter to the audiences. Here are some examples.

Example 3:

*Manny: I wanna go to the mall where she works. But first I need to get my white shirt, the silk one.*

*Gloria: Okay. If that's what you really want to do.*

*Jay: Seriously. Not to be the evil stepdad, but if you put on a puffy white shirt... and declare your love for a 16-year-old, you're gonna be swinging from the flagpole in your puffy white underpants.*

In this example, Manny can't wait to tell. As an unusual child, Manny seems to be more mature in words and deeds than his peers, and his aesthetic is not like an 11-year-old. He likes a 16 year old girl. His favorite shirt is made of silk. But Jay doesn't think Manny is suitable for silk shirts. He doesn't compliment Manny on his outfit, nor does he approve of the girlfriend he wants to choose. Jay maximizes dispraise of other, which violets the approval maxim. Jay and Manny are both obsessed with their own views, which creates a sense of humor.

#### 4.2.4 Humor Produced by Violating the Modesty Maxim

The modesty maxim means that the speaker should minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. Compared with the approbation maxim, this maxim concentrates on the speaker himself. In our life, we always behave modestly to show politeness. Especially in Chinese culture, modesty is the representative quality of a gentleman. However, as the development of globalization, influenced by the western culture, the status of modesty may be somewhat weakened in teenagers' mind. In sitcoms, the violation of modesty is always exaggerated and produces humorous effect.

Example 4:

*Phil: The thing about me and Jay is our relationship's... always been stuck in that, that primal place where it started. You know, he's the old silverback protecting his females, then along comes this younger, stronger gorilla swinging in, beating his chest. You know, naturally, the ape ladies come running, presenting their nice scarlet behinds. Papa ape wants to stop all that, but he can't. You know? That's-That's life. I'm not the enemy. The enemy is poachers.*

*Jay: That'll do it. Don't touch it.*

*Phil: All right.*

In this example, Phil finally gets a chance to play with Jay on the model plane. Phil has been looking forward to spending more time alone with Jay to improve their relationship, because Jay has been not very satisfied with Phil. And Phil thinks Jay is jealous of being younger and stronger and taking his daughter. Phil is not modest at all. He compares Jay to an old silverback gorilla, while he is a young, stronger gorilla. Although it violates the modest maxim, it produces a kind of humor.

#### 4.2.5 Humor Produced by Violating the Agreement Maxim

The agreement maxim means that the speaker should minimize disagreement between self and others, and maximize agreement between self and others. In the real life, disagreement in views is inevitable since everyone has his own mind. To reach an agreement and be polite, we may make some compromise or seek common ground while reserving differences. In sitcoms, the violation of agreement maxim always brings humorous effect.

Example 5:

*Gloria: Men need their hobbies. Manny's father had many hobbies. Like hiking in the desert, that kind of skiing that they drop you from the... How do you say in English?*

*Jay: Helicopter.*

*Gloria: Yes. Once, on a dare, he even boxed with an alligator.*

*Jay: "Wrestle." You wrestle. You can't box with alligators.*

*Gloria: Are you sure?*

*Jay: How would they get the gloves on those little claws?*

*Gloria: Aren't they like tiny little hands?*

*Jay: No!*

*Gloria: Okay, now I forgot what we're talking about.*

In this example, Gloria says that Manny's father has many hobbies. To show his strength, Gloria exaggerates that he boxed with an alligator wearing boxing gloves. It's hard to tell the true from the false. Of course, Jay thinks Gloria's talking nonsense. So Jay denies and questions every word of Gloria. But during the conversation Gloria seems to explain to Jay very carefully and answer his questions. Although Jay violates the agreement maxim, such a conversation can make the audience laugh.

#### 4.2.6 Humor Produced by Violating the Sympathy Maxim

The sympathy maxim requires the speaker to minimize antipathy between self and others, and to maximize sympathy between self and others. It is easy to understand, since in our real life, when others encounter misfortune, we always show our sympathy to them. It is not only out of politeness,



but also out of kindness in our heart. However, in sitcoms, in order to reach humorous effect, characters may intentionally violate the sympathy maxim and aggravate the misfortune of others for the audiences' laughter.

Example 6:

*Cameron: Mitchell ! Oh my god.*

*Mitchell: Did-No ! Oh.my God ! -No. Cam ! Cam. We-Did we do that ?*

*Cameron: What are we gonna say ?*

*Mitchell: I will take the job.*

*Charlie Bingham: Kinda think you have to now.*

*Mitchell: Yeah.*

During this conversation, Mitchell and Cameron visits Charlie Bingham's house but accidentally damages Charlie's car. Charlie is very unfriendly when they knows it, and ignores their anxiety, but directly and ruthlessly told the truth-Mitchell was going to work for him. Mitchell has been considering whether to work for Charlie Bingham, but now has to accept the job to offset the damage he did to the car. Charlie breaks the sympathy maxim by making, making the audience laugh at helpless Mitchell and Cameron.

Why does this kind of language which violates politeness principle play a humorous role? Culpeper sums up several reasons: emotional pleasure, aesthetic pleasure, voyeuristic pleasure, the pleasure of being superior, and the pleasure of being safe (Liu, 2014). Emotional pleasure is the effect of emotional thrill caused by the use of impolite language. Aesthetic pleasure refers to the creative use of impolite language, which belongs to the aesthetic entertainment skill of high-level attacking face. Voyeuristic pleasure refers to the intentional exposure of self-privacy in front of the public through impolite language, sometimes achieving the entertainment effect. The pleasure of being superior means that you are secretly happy when others are unlucky. And the safety pleasure of being safe is the entertainment pleasure of the hearer to stay out of the business and watch the tiger fight across the mountain.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Major Findings of the Study

Taking the politeness principle as the theoretical framework and the humorous discourse in the first season of Modern Family as an example, this paper analyzes the laughing mechanism of humorous discourse in American sitcoms. Studies have shown that the Modern Family sitcom became popular with audiences around the world because of its humorous language. The use of preset rules of pragmatics in dialogue produces humorous effects. This article selects some of the corpus from the first season of Modern Family and analyzes the laughter generated by the violation of the six principles. And the conclusion is drawn that the violation of politeness principle can produce humorous effect in some specific language environments. Through analysis, it reveals that Leech's politeness principle not only provides a theoretical basis for the analysis of verbal humor of English jokes, but also provides a mechanism for the generation and understanding of verbal humor of English jokes. It is helpful for English learners to understand the differences between Chinese and western

culture and thinking through English jokes. It is also helpful for improving people's communicative competence, creating a relaxed and happy communicative atmosphere and achieving harmonious interpersonal relationship. In addition, with the increasingly rich linguistic theories, we should not only analyze the verbal humor of English language from one perspective by using one kind of corpus, but also interpret the verbal humor of English language from multiple perspectives and from multiple kinds of corpus. Only in this way can we better understand and study the humorous characteristics of English language.

Many researchers have so far generally believed that impolite speech only occurs in conflicting, non-cooperative communication types. However, looking at the examples in life, it is not difficult to find that, as an onlooker, sometimes the lack of politeness is also a source of humor that makes people laugh and laugh. For example, for the audience, the comic dialogue appearing in the sketch plays a humorous function of impolite speech. And for both sides of communication, they know that the purpose of verbal impoliteness of one side of communication is not to really offend or hurt the other, their common purpose is to entertain the audience, and they will cooperate for this common communication purpose. Regardless of personal gains and losses, even mutual derogation will not affect the smooth progress of the conversation, nor will it lead to social conflicts and disharmony. If we use the concept of interest to explain, it means that the communicators themselves realize the exchange of individual interests and collective interests.

## 5.2 Limitations of the Study

There are still many shortcomings in the paper that need to be improved in the future

First, this study only focuses on qualitative research. And due to the limited time and energy, it is impossible to analyze all the humorous conversations that violate the politeness principle in the first season. The materials listed in this paper are typical examples of violation of six maxims. Therefore, in the following research, more efforts can be put into the construction and use of the corpus of sitcoms, constantly expanding the corpus, combining qualitative and quantitative, so as to conduct a more comprehensive and thorough exploration of the humor and cooperative principles of sitcoms.

Then, this paper focuses exclusively on verbal humor generating from violating the maxims of PP, which is only a part of humor study system. It does not expound the verbal humor of *Modern Family*, the popular American situation comedy, from perspectives of other disciplines, like philosophy, cognitive, sociology, or psychology.

Some other points are worth exploring in the future. Improvements of this paper in both the width of research and depth of the study can be made.

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