



**ON THE PRAGMATIC EFFECTS OF THE LINES IN AMERICAN *SITCOM*
THE BIG BANG THEORY**

LIU Shuting

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China

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ABSTRACT

Through studying utterance examples from the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* based on the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, the paper is designed to have a look at the pragmatic effects of the characters' lines, thus providing some implications for language learning and interpersonal communication.

Key words:

The Big Bang Theory, Cooperative Principle, pragmatic effects

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INTRODUCTION

As one particular demonstration of nowadays' cultural exchanges at the international community, the widespread of foreign sitcoms continues to gain great momentum. To put it metaphorically, sitcoms are encyclopedia telling stories about the livelihood, culture and customs of a country, conveying a large amount of messages ranging from the political background to common people's life. By means of ridicule and other approaches to creating particular effects, some social issues are exposed and reflected in sitcoms, with the audience enjoying the relaxing plot while making introspective considerations on themselves and the society at the same time. This is where the value of sitcoms lies. The continuously growing popularity of American sitcoms has attracted many linguistic scholars' attention to researches on the lines of sitcoms, with the research focuses centering on subtitle translation (Jiang, 2016; Wu, 2016; Mei, 2013), cultural projection, discourse analysis (Lv, 2007), style analysis, etc. This study, using the lines in American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* as research material, analyses some examples derived from the characters' conversations from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle, in the hope to explore the wonder of language with a simple pragmatic stylistic analysis and to provide some implications to English education and interpersonal communication.

This study consists of six parts, namely, introduction, theoretical basis, methodology, example analysis, implication and conclusion. The first part introduces certain background information related to the subject. The second part illustrates briefly what Cooperative Principle is about. The third part presents the methodology adopted in this study, including research questions, data collection, and analytical process. The fourth part discusses some actual conversational examples from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* from the perspective of Cooperative Principle. The fifth part presents two implications from the analysis of this study. The last part gives a simple summary of this study.

THEORETICAL BASIS

According to Grice, the participants of a conversation, with the purpose of delivering successful conversation, will always cooperate with each other, and they are expected to observe the following principles: *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* (Grice, 1975:45-46). In other words, conversations are meaningful and comprehensible when the both sides have a common goal or direction. This is the essence of the Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice. To put it specifically, there are four maxims under this principle, which are illustrated as follows:

1. Maxim of quantity
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange.
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

*Corresponding author: **LIU Shuting**
Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, China

2. Maxim of quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - b. Do not say what for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. Maxim of relation: Be relevant.
4. Maxim of manner: Be perspicuous.
 - a. Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - b. Avoid ambiguity.
 - c. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - d. Be orderly. (Grice, 1975)

When people follow all the maxims mentioned above during communication with others as they are expected, according to Grice, no implicature will be produced because both sides of the speakers talk to each other in a directly and sincerely manner, expressing what they really thinks, and thus no misunderstanding will occur. However, sometimes people fail to follow these maxims or even deliberately violate them to achieve some purposes. Under this circumstance, there is conversation implicature in people’s utterances and particular effects, like humor and irony, may at the meantime be generated. Judged in this light, based on the verbal materials originated from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, this study focuses on the implicature reflected from the characters’ conversational language with each other, discussing the pragmatic use of these utterances.

METHODOLOGY

This part introduces the research methodology adopted in this essay. It is composed of two sections. The first section presents the research questions. The second section introduces the process of data collection and data analysis. The purpose of this study is to analyze the utterances violating the Cooperative Principle and their implications in the field of language education and interpersonal relationships. With this research objectives in mind, the present study attempts to provide answers to the following questions:

- Q1: How do the characters’ utterances violate the Cooperative Principle?
 Q2: What are the implicatures from their utterances?
 Q3: What are the implications to the sitcom audience?

As for data collection, research materials are collected from the famous American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* for its conversational corpus being up-to-date as well as close-to-daily-life. From the perspective of Cooperative Principle and its maxims, the study aims to explore into the glamour of the verbal effects of this sitcom. To put it specifically, research materials are selected from Episode 12, Season 12, the last episode of the last season of this TV program broadcasted in 2018 via Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). During the analytical process, these collected utterances of particular effects will be analyzed under the framework of the Cooperative Principle in detail, particularly to examine which maxim has been violated. By means of discussing such violations of maxims, it is expected to explain the pragmatic effects in the situation comedy in a reasonable and comprehensible way.

Example Studies

To facilitate readers’ understanding of the characters’ utterances, the author of this study would like to give a brief introduction to the sitcom’s main characters first before analyzing their conversations with each other. In order to give a clear illustration of the characters, including themselves and their interpersonal relationships, a chart designed by the author is presented in the following:

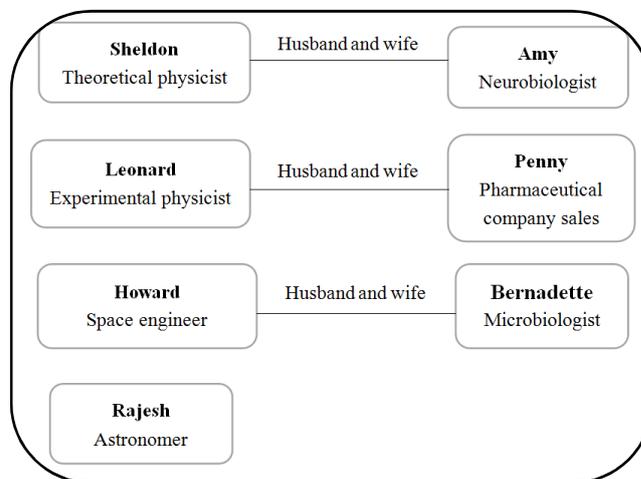


Figure 1 Character relationships in the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*

To put it simply, the left row shows the names and jobs of the main male characters of the sitcom, i.e., Sheldon, Leonard, Howard and Rajesh, and the right row the main female characters, i.e., Amy, Penny and Bernadette. As clearly shown in the figure, Sheldon and Amy are husband and wife, so are Leonard and Penny, and Howard and Bernadette, while Rajesh remains single until the latest episode. They are all good friends to each other.

Example 1

Bernadette: *Why don’t we do this more often?*

Amy: *Because you have two babies. I have Sheldon. And Penny’s apparently in the gym all the time, ’cause damn, look at her!(Laughter)*

Bernadette: *Yeah, so impressive how you manage to bounce back after having NO babies. (Laughter)*

Penny: *Ah, another reason why we don’t do this more often.*

This conversation happens when the three female characters are having a girls’ night at a bar. They are sitting at a table, having drinks. In Bernadette’s first utterance, the word “this” means “they girls hanging out together and enjoying themselves”. Amy’s answer implicates a lot of messages: First, she put her husband Sheldon and the two newly born babies of Bernadette’s at the same place, suggesting that Sheldon is childlike and needs her handling daily matters so much. Second, she says something that she knows isn’t true: Penny’s slim not because she goes to the gym all the time; she’s born like this. This is a violation of the maxim of quality. From this sentence, audience may feel the sense of humor by means of Amy’s jealous-like tone. Additionally, after Amy, Bernadette continues on showing her jealousy to Penny’s slim figure too. By such saying, the implicature is that it is quite hard for Bernadette to “bounce back” to her original figure after having two babies. Lastly, Penny continues what they left behind earlier, concluding that she being slim, while her two friends

relatively chubby, is “another reason” they don’t hang out often. As shown above, the laughter edited in are presented with brackets. By the number of the mark “(laughter)”, it is easy to imagine the humor in this conversation.

Example 2

Penny: Thank you, but you shouldn’t have spent so much.

Zach: It’s cool. I sold my company for a boatload of money. And then I bought a boat. (laughter) And then I got married. Guess where.

Amy: On your boat?

Zach: No, but that would’ve been awesome! (laughter)

This conversation happens after Zach, Penny’s ex-boyfriend, sent a bottle of champagne to their table and came over to say hi. When Penny knew the price of that champagne, she said “thank you” to Zach and he started to tell them where his money came from. Zach’s utterances are funny. They are logical by the first look, seemingly following a sequential order, i.e., selling his company, getting a lot of money, buying a boat and getting married. But actually, these sentences violated the maxims under Cooperative Principle. First, it is a violation of the maxim of quantity: the fact that he has bought a boat has nothing to do with the current conversation, which is demonstrated by the following dialogue between he and Amy. This is extra information to the listeners. Second, it is a violation of the maxim of relevance. Zach may thought that there is a relation between “boatload” and “boat”, but actually there isn’t. Nevertheless, a sense of humor has been delivered and the character’s characteristic of being simple-minded has been sent to the audience by his directness in speaking.

Example 3

Leonard: Uh, do you remember Penny’s ex-boyfriend Zach?

Sheldon: Leonard, I remember all of Penny’s ex-boyfriends. If you’d like, I could just list them alphabetically.

Leonard: No, thank you.

Sheldon: Fun fact. You would think Zach would be the last one on the list, but she also dated two Zekes.

This conversation provides another example of the character in the sitcom violating the maxim of quantity. Sheldon’s answer to Leonard’s question is “more informative than is required” (Grice, 1975). Before getting married with Leonard, Penny had many ex-boyfriends. Leonard asked about one of Penny’s ex-boyfriend named Zach, while Sheldon, as always, provided too much information than is requested, suggesting that he remember all of Penny’s ex-boyfriends and that Penny has so much ex-boyfriends that he could “list them alphabetically”. After listening to this, Leonard of course doesn’t want to know such sort of thing, thus replied “No, thank you”. But Sheldon continued to provide more evidence showing that he’s quite familiar with Penny’s romantic history. It could be said that Sheldon missed the point in the conversation with his best friend and say something slightly hurtful accidentally.

Example 4

Rajesh: I make one mistake, and she says she doesn’t want to marry me. Like she never screwed up.

Bernadette: Did she?

Rajesh: Well, she agreed to marry me.

In this scene, Rajesh’s fiancée broke up with him because he installed a door camera to spy on her, Rajesh came to complain with Bernadette and Howard. So in Rajesh’s saying, “one mistake” refers to he spying on her, and he seemed to think that both of them have made mistakes and he is not the only one to blame for this broken relationship. When Bernadette asked did his fiancée screw up once, Rajesh answered her agreement to marry him is the mistake she had made. In Rajesh’s answer, the maxim of manner has been violated for Rajesh, by such utterance, made the meaning of “mistake” ambiguous, to achieve an effect of humor and ridicule on himself.

The previously discussed examples are selected from the first 8 minutes of Episode 12, Season 12 of the sitcom. Evidently, this sitcom attains widespread popularity and ranks top among the audience for some grounded reasons, the frequent delivery of sense of humor and ridicule for one particular reason.

IMPLICATION

One implication of the sitcom language analyzed from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle is for English education. For a long time, the creation of a native language learning environment has been one significant problem of English education for foreign speakers. English learners living in countries other than English-speaking countries may find it difficult to learn English in their home-country environment with little, if there is any, English using scenarios in daily life, such as verbal communication between friends or written signs on papers. However, using sitcoms as a kind of teaching assistance material may help improve the problem. Nowadays, with the advancement of science and technology as well as improvement in social welfare and national security, more and more regions and countries, even those with poorer economic performance, have access to the Internet, via which educational information from across the globe can be obtained and made to best use. For students who live in remote areas or less international cities or who do not have the resources to attend overseas studying programs, they may acquire not only English the language but also the cultures of those English-speaking countries, broadening their horizons via watching sitcoms reflecting other people’s life in countries far away and different from their own’s. What’s more, being relevant to people’s everyday life, sitcom language is easy to learn and master.

Another implication is for interpersonal relationships, or specifically, how to maintain a sound relationship with others by understanding the implicatures in their utterances and responding properly. As we mentioned previously, by following the Cooperative Principle and its maxims, the utterances are straightforward with no underlying implicatures. Whereas when the maxims are violated, some particular pragmatic effects will be produced, such as humor and ridicule. With such pragmatic effects, the communication atmosphere may be changed accordingly. For example, in Example 4, Rajesh was complaining with his friends, feeling sad about the broken relationship with his fiancée. The incident is undoubtedly hurtful, but in the later conversation, Rajesh’s answer about she agreeing to marry him being a mistake successfully changed the atmosphere to not-so-sad and filled with a sense of humor. This and other examples of violating the Cooperative Principle maxims enlightens us on

how to reduce the tense of atmosphere by injecting into the conversation a sense of humor.

CONCLUSION

To start with, this study is of its own merits. First of all, the research material is the most updated from the latest episode released in 2018. Secondly, the design of the character relationship chart helps the reader better understand the interpersonal relationship in this sitcom. The combination of both figures and letters may be able to present the idea in a more comprehensible manner.

However, there are some limitations in this study due to various reasons such as the author's unqualified capability, restricted corpus and limited time. Firstly, the amount of examples selected from the sitcom could be larger so as to make the findings more convincing. Secondly, in terms of research method, only qualitative method is adopted, while quantitative method could be added to this study. For example, there could be a data collection process where the total number of utterances of particular pragmatic effects could be counted and presented to the reader. In this case, there should also be an objective, but not subjective, evaluation standard for selecting such examples.

This study is only an attempt of the author in exploring the pragmatic effects of the sitcom language from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle. It is expected that further improvements could be pursued regarding this study to make the research implications more convincing and to discover more of the wonder of language.

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