

# Generation Method of Verbal Humor in Sketch Comedy *To Pay or not to Pay* Based on the Presupposition and CP

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**Abstract:** Comedy sketch is a popular form of artistic expression, and much of their humour arises from verbal humour. Cooperative Principle and Pragmatic Presupposition are important theories in the study of pragmatics. Pragmatic Presupposition plays an important role in the generation of verbal humour. Comedy sketches create humorous effects by first establishing preconceptions in actors' discourses and then evading them, which fails the audience's psychological expectations, thus producing a humorous effect. Another way of producing humorous effects in sketches is through violating the quantitative, qualitative, relational, and manner maxims of the Cooperative Principle. Therefore, this paper applies the theory of the Cooperative Principle and Pragmatic Presupposition and uses the comedy sketch *To Pay or not to Pay* from the Spring Festival Gala of the Tiger as a corpus to explore the generation of verbal humor.

**Keywords:** verbal humor, comedy sketches, cooperative principle, pragmatic presupposition

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## Introduction

Since the 18th National Congress, General Secretary Xi Jinping has spoken on various occasions about traditional Chinese culture and emphasized the need to build cultural confidence and spread excellent traditional Chinese culture to the world. At such time, things like cheongsam, Hanfu (the traditional Chinese dresses), Beijing opera and Tai Chi with strong Chinese cultural traits have already appeared in Western countries. At the aspect of theatrical performances, the Talk Show, a classic Western television show, has also appeared on almost major Chinese television stations, like Tonight 80s Talk Show, Mr. Zhou Live Show, Roast, etc. In contrast, traditional Chinese performances like crosstalk and sketch comedy, rarely present on the Western television shows. The reason for this is the difference between the English and Chinese languages, which makes the Chinese and Western perceive humour differently, so most Westerners have not yet accepted this form of performance. Despite there being differences in languages, they produce verbal humour similarly. Because the same verbal humour strategies are used to produce humorous effects. In this research background, this paper aims to analyse some actors' lines in the 2022 Spring Festival Gala sketch *To Pay or not to Pay* based on the theories of Pragmatic Presupposition and Cooperation Principle, uncover the underlying producing pattern of verbal humour within the language and indicate the cultural charm of the Chinese. The ultimate aim is to promote the comedy sketch overseas.

Comedy sketch is a kind of art form in which actors perform and talk with each other in a special situation. It is the art of humour. Satirical jokes that express the reality, goodness, and beauty of human-being usually characterize different sketches. It makes a humorous effect through vividly describing daily characters or events and ultimately makes the audience introspect themselves. The punchlines in the comedy sketch are called Baofu (the baggage). The humorous effect

of a sketch relies heavily on the creative use of language called Dou Baofu (shaking the baggage). It has long been popular with audiences, and verbal humor is an important attractive factor. In the Modern Chinese Dictionary, they define humour as something funny, comical, meaningful, and thought-provoking. In *Humour and Verbal Humour*, Tan Daren (1997) defines verbal humour as humour expressed in words<sup>[1]</sup>. As we all know that language is an articulate symbolic system with arbitrariness. From this perspective, verbal humour is also communicative and interactive.

## 1. Literature review

Since the 1950s, there has been a proliferation of research on verbal humour. Raskin firstly proposed the Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) in 1985, which indicates that jokes and humorous speech target the opposition, overlap, and transformation of two or more scripts or frames as the center<sup>[2]</sup>(Jiang Bingqing, Jiang Cheng, 2008). Later, Attardo (1991) proposed a General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) based on the SSTH with Raskin<sup>[3]</sup>. They attempted to use the GTVH to explain various types of humorous speech. Both of these two theories study verbal humor from a semantic perspective.

After the 1990s, however, scholars no longer confined themselves to semantic perspective alone and focus on the external influences of language such as the context under the great influence of the philosophical turn in the study of linguistics. This is because they found that verbal humour cannot be perceived without the role of context. Thus there are also a wealth of theories studying verbal humour from a pragmatic perspective, such as Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Leech's Politeness Principle.

From the perspective of the CP, Yao Xiaomin and Song Liya (2019) analyzed the humour generation method of English jokes and found that it relies mainly on violating various maxims of the CP<sup>[4]</sup>. Wang Shuo and Cui Yanhui (2019) analyzed the dialogue of characters in the 17th season of *The Big Bang Theory* based on Pragmatic Presupposition and argued that humor in daily conversation arises from violating the consensus and appropriateness of Pragmatic Presupposition and following the defeasibility<sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, the Relevance Theory in pragmatics is also commonly used to explain the generation method of verbal humour. For example, Wang Ying (2019) analysed the verbal humour in the sitcom *Friends* from the perspective of the Relevance Theory, arguing that humour mainly arises from the gap between ostension and inference, between maximum and optimal relevance, differences in cognitive contexts, and differences in context effects<sup>[6]</sup>.

The literature combining pragmatic theories and verbal humour is countless. By reading and integrating relevant literature, I found that there is the strongest correlation between verbal humour and Pragmatic Presupposition or CP. Scholars often use them to interpret various types of humour effects. Therefore, this paper uses these two theories as a theoretical framework to analyze some actors' lines in the 2022 Spring Festival Gala sketch *To Pay or not to Pay*. At last, exploring how actors make verbal humour and how it takes effect.

## 2. Concept overview

### 2.1 Cooperative principle

The American philosopher Grice (1975) said: "Our conversations are not just a string of irrelevant words, otherwise it would be unreasonable. They are usually behaviors with others' cooperation. In other words, all participants have a common goal or at least a mutually accepted direction". This fundamental principle consists of four maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner<sup>[7]</sup>. (Hu Zhuanglin, Jiang Wangqi, 2015) However, people do not strictly follow these maxims in actual language communication. There must be some other intention that makes them deliberately violate these rules. The speaker wants to use his special expressions to convey a deeper meaning, which is called conversational implicature. Conversational implicature is an implied meaning. It can be inferred and understood by contacting the context of a speech conversation. In the combination of the CP and verbal humour, scholars have often focused more on how speakers make verbal humour. In the study of deliberately violating the CP during communicating, He Ziran (2004) argued that because the first speaker adhering to the manner maxim sends as much information as possible to the second speaker, the second

one can deliberately misinterpret the first one's meaning by violating the CP to tease his peers and achieve humour effect<sup>[8]</sup>.

## 2.2 Pragmatic presupposition

Presupposition is the assumptions made by speakers in the discourse and is composed of semantic and pragmatic presupposition. The semantic presupposition is objective, non-contextual and static, which is an analysis of the sentence itself. On the contrary, the pragmatic presupposition is subjective, contextual, and dynamic, which closely is related to the speaker, the addressee, and the context<sup>[9]</sup> (Liu Guohui, 2001). It is the speaker's assumption based on the context. Most of the factors that make comedy sketches so popular with numerous audiences are due to their humorous witty language. Mr. Lao She (1981), a famous master of language art in China, once said: "No matter how good the plot of a comedy is, if it is not at all times equipped with sharp, vivid words, it is certain that the comic effect will be lost."<sup>[10]</sup> (Wang Xingzhi, 1981) Words are constructed in a special context. So there is no concrete meaning of words without the context. As an important linguistic theory, Pragmatic Presupposition is widely used in verbal communication. Humorous speech, as a refined and specific form of verbal communication, contains various presuppositions. And the humour of speech arises from the unfulfilled expectation of presupposition.

According to the study of verbal humor based on the Pragmatic Presuppositions and CP, it indicates that humour is mostly generated in situations that violate these two theories. However, these studies have all favoured a separate pragmatic theoretical perspective to explain and analyze the generation method and effects of humour and do not consider the communicative nature of the discourse. Therefore, this paper will analyze the fictional corpus together with these two theories.

## 3. Generation method of verbal humor in comedy sketches

Speech participants usually contain at least a speaker and a listener, who can interact smoothly and complete the speech act with the same presuppositions and by following the CP. However, in actual speech acts, especially in humorous speech, the participants deliberately violate these theories to achieve the humor effect of the words. They no longer cooperate with each other or give adequate and relevant information needed to complete the dialogue.

Shen Teng is one of the most famous comedy actors in China, and he's also a brilliant director. He was born in Qiqihar, Heilongjiang, China in 1979. He attended the People's Liberation Army Academy of Art in 1999 and received a bachelor's degree in 2003. One of the most popular comedians in China. Shen has performed on CCTV's several New Year Galas and played the leading role in the film *Goodbye Mr. Loser* in 2015, which was his breakout film role. Since then, he has starred in films such as *Hello Mr. Billionaire* and *Pegasus*. In 2020, He ranked 28th on Forbes China Celebrity 100 list. Lately, the total box office of the films he has acted in has exceeded 25 billion, ranking him second among Chinese actors. There is an Internet buzzword "Han Teng Liang (the rate of appearance of Shen Teng)" which expresses how much the audience loves him.

This paper targets some actors' lines in the 2022 Spring Festival Gala sketch *To Pay or not to Pay* as a research object. Shen Teng and Ma Li, two popular comedy partners, acted leading roles who are a couple and Shen Teng is a deadbeat. Ai Lun and Chang Yuan acted as the creditors and they all were Shen Teng's old classmates. This story is about the experience of two old school friends who failed to press for payment of debt. Next, the author will use Pragmatic Presupposition and the CP to analyse some lines in the sketch *To Pay or not to Pay*, and to briefly analyse and discuss the generating ways of verbal humour in comedy sketches.

### Example 1:

沈腾: 哎呀, 王哥, 你再宽限我两天呗, 钱我肯定还你, 我咋不接你电话了, 你这不换个号打过来我就接了吗, 你放心啊, 房子我都挂网上了, 正往外卖呢, 房东不让卖, 王哥你骂我吧, 完了我也骂房东去。

马丽: 老沈, 老沈呐, 快看看吧, 你照片被发网上了, 你已经在失信人名单里边了, 这以后谁还管你叫老沈啊, 都得管你叫老赖了, 多丢人呐, 快想想办法。

沈腾: 确实该想想办法, 该找人换个照片, 这双下巴都出来了。

马丽: 哎你。

This example is an excerpt from the beginning of the sketch. Through the dialogues between the hero and one of his creditors, Mr. Wang, and several dialogues with his wife, the actors have explained the background of the story, which is the context. And Shen Teng's image as an untrustworthy deadbeat is also presented to the audience.

Firstly, the sentence "I have listed the house on the internet and been selling it, but the landlord won't let me sell it." violates the quality maxim in the CP. The quality maxim requires the speaker not to say things that he or she knows to be false or lacking in evidence. But he told a lie that his house is being sold to stall his creditor, Mr. Wang. In addition, he said that the landlord would not allow him to sell the house to find another excuse.

Secondly, the sentence "Why didn't I answer your call? I answered it when you called from a different number, didn't I?" also violates the quality maxim. He cheated on Mr. Wang. Moreover, this sentence has violated the Pragmatic Presupposition. The actual answer to others' queries should be euphemistic and polite. People would try their best to explain why they did not answer the call. But Shen didn't answer in this way, even it was clear from his tone of voice that he was deliberately not answering the phone. This kind of answer brings the audience an unusual feeling, further deepening the image of Shen as a scoundrel in the audience's mind, thus creating a humor effect.

Thirdly, in the dialogue between Shen and his wife, she wanted to remind him that they have posted his picture on the internet and his name is already on the list of defaulters. But Shen didn't take it seriously and even thought that they should change it into a handsome one without a double chin. His answer violates the relation maxim which requires that the dialogue between speakers should be relevant. From the image of the double chin, we may infer that Shen is not poor and his living quality is not too bad. It indicates that he does not even want to pay it back. This unexpected answer, coupled with Shen Teng's superb acting skills, certainly got a good laugh from the audience.

Through the above belief analysis, the verbal humor in comedy sketches is constantly produced during the communicative process of breaking old preconceptions and reconstructing new ones and the process of deliberately complying with or violating the CP. Moreover, the identity of the two or more participants in the discourse is constantly changing in the course of the dialogue, and the roles of speaker and listener are not unique and fixed. When the listener does not respond positively to the sender's question, the sender will not respond to the question. When the listener responds positively and ceaselessly to the speaker's question, the preconceptions made by the speaker will be invalid. Then the listener responds in a way that violates the CP, which makes verbal humor and makes people laugh.

#### Example 2:

马丽: 我听你俩这嗓子这是要冒烟儿了, 我去给你们倒点儿水。

沈腾: 丽啊, 我老同学来了, 我亲自为他俩服务。

艾伦: 你就别动弹了。

沈腾: 我看见你俩啊, 我这病都好一半儿了。差点忘了, 家停水了, 好几个月没交水费了, 喝点儿暖气水吧, 可热乎了, 我都喝好长时间了, 特别好, 还补铁呢。

马丽: 你是真损呐!

This example presents a scene that Shen Teng poured water for Ai Lun and Chang Yuan to drink. Ma said: "I think you must be thirsty. I pour some water for you to drink." Shen interrupted Ma and said: "Let me do it. I am willing to serve my old school friends by myself." This dialogue makes a presupposition that Shen wants to pour water for them because they haven't seen each other for a long time. From the surface meaning of Shen's words, audiences may think there is a deep friendship between Shen and his classmates. But in the next words, Shen told them the water has gotten cut off because he didn't have money to pay the water bill for several months. So he was going to pour the water from the heating system for them. After hearing these words and combining them with context to think, audiences suddenly realized that Shen Teng is not helping because of his goodness, but trying to emphasize his miserable situation by the fact that he cannot afford to pay the water bill. It breaks the previous presupposition and pokes fun at the audience. On the other hand, Shen especially emphasized the advantages of heating water. He said heating water can replenish the body with the iron it needs and he has drunk it for a long time. These words are unnecessary for their dialogue. So Shen has violated the quantity maxim. They also make an unexpected effect for audiences to create humor.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Comedy sketches attract numerous audiences with their humorous words. These words seem to be easy for comedy actors to create immediately, but they have used many hidden principles of pragmatics. This paper analyzed the generation mechanism of verbal humour in comedy sketches from the perspective of the CP and Pragmatic Presuppositions and found that its verbal humour is made by violating these theories.

Both comedies and tragedies reflect real human emotions. This article is too homogeneous with a single research object, future analyses and summaries of multiple language performance forms can also be carried out simultaneously from a pragmatic perspective.

#### **Conflicts of interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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