The Analysis of the Creation of Verbal Humor in *The Parent Trap* from the Perspective of the Violation of Cooperative Principle

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**Abstract**

**Research background:** Grice, an American philosopher, put forward the theory of conversational implicature and cooperative principle in 1967, which has become an important part of pragmatics. Under the guidance of conversational implicature theory and cooperative principle, the research focus of pragmatics has shifted from static isolated words to dynamic multi-dimensional communication, such as movies, dramas, advertisements, sitcoms and so on. *The Parent Trap* is a family comedy film produced by the United States in 1998. It tells a touching story about a pair of twin sisters Annie and Hallie who have never met before meet at a camp and switched their places, finally they help their divorced parents get back together. **Research methods:** This thesis will select the dialogue content with humorous effect in the film, and then make use of textual analysis to analyze it with the Cooperative Principle to study how the humorous effect is produced. **Conclusion:** If someone violates the maxims of the cooperative principle, people in this dialogue may appear a little silly because of lack of information, feel overwhelmed because of redundant information, deliberately violate the rules to satirize others, may contradict what he or she has said before and appear ironic, may appear strange and funny because of deviation from the subject, may appear abrupt and awkward because of obscure language, may appear ironic because of ambiguity and lengthy expression, and appear funny because of confusion. In this way, the effect of humor is produced.

**Keywords**

Cooperative Principle, the creation of humor, *The Parent Trap*

1. Introduction

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics, which studies the meaning and effect of using language in specific situations. Since the 1960s, pragmatics has developed rapidly. Grice, an American philosopher, put forward the theory of conversational implicature and cooperative principle in 1967, which has become an important part of pragmatics. Under the guidance of conversational implicature theory and cooperative principle, the research focus of pragmatics has shifted from static isolated words to dynamic multi-dimensional communication, such as movies, dramas, advertisements, sitcoms and so on. *The Parent Trap* is a family comedy film produced by the United States in 1998. It tells a touching story about a pair of twin sisters Annie and Hallie who have never met before meet at a camp and switched their places, finally they help their divorced parents get back together.
2. Literature Review

2.1 Previous Studies on Verbal Humor Abroad and at Home

Western Scholars have made lots of achievements in studying humorous utterances in different fields. Hancher (1980) explains the generation of jokes which is breaching conversational implicatures. Attardo (1990; 1993) makes a detailed illustration about humor through the flouting of Grice’s CP. And he thinks that the flouting of Cooperative Principle exactly could cause humorous effects because of its contrary to fact. In terms of Relevance Theory, Curco (1995; 1996) shares his perception of humor. Holmes (2006) develops how humor is applied to communities in the workplace and the range of gender in the office particularly. Distortion humor and disclosure humor are two categories divided by Apter and Desselles (2012) and they endeavor to present a cognitive interpretation towards humor on the existing basis of two categories.


2.2 Cooperative Principle

2.2.1 The Study of Cooperative Principle

The American philosopher Grice put forward the Cooperative Principle in 1967 when giving the speech “Logic and Conversation” at Harvard University. Grice said that verbal exchanges are not just a simple combination of meaningless words, but a special system under the control of particular conditions where certain rules should be obeyed by speakers and hearers in daily conversations (Grice, 2002). The Cooperative Principle states “make your 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). To make a further explanation of the Cooperative Principle, four maxims are proposed by Grice and they are shown as below:

(1) The 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

(2) The Maxim of Quality
   (a) Do not say what you believe to be false
   (b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

(3) The Maxim of Relevance

(4) The Maxim of Manner
   (a) Avoid obscurity
   (b) Avoid ambiguity
   (c) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
   (d) Be orderly

2.2.2 The Violations of Cooperative Principle

It is possible to violate a maxim and thereby convey a meaning which is different from what is literally said. Often in conversations, a speaker violates a maxim to produce a negative pragmatic effect, as with sarcasm or irony. One can violate the maxim of quality to tell a clumsy friend who has just taken a bad fall that his gracefulness is impressive and obviously intend to mean the complete opposite. Likewise, violating the maxim of quantity may result in ironic understatement, the maxim of relevance in blame by irrelevant praise, and the maxim of manner in ironic ambiguity. The Gricean maxims are therefore often purposefully violated by comedians and writers, who may hide the complete truth and choose their words for the effect of the story and the sake of the reader's experience.

Speakers who deliberately violate the maxims usually intend for their listener to understand their underlying implicature. In the case of the clumsy friend, he will most likely understand that the speaker is not truly offering a compliment. Therefore, cooperation is still taking place, but no longer on the literal level. When speakers violate a maxim, they still do so with the aim of expressing some thought. Thus, the Gricean maxims serve a purpose both when they are followed and when they are violated.
3. Methodology

This part includes two parts: research questions and procedures.

3.1 Research Questions

This thesis takes the American romantic comedy film *The Parents Trap* as the research object, and takes the Cooperative Principle in linguistics as the main theory to address the following four research questions:

(1) How do the dialogues in this film create humor by violating the Quantity Maxim of the Cooperative Principle?

(2) How do the dialogues in this film create humor by violating the Quality Maxim of the Cooperative Principle?

(3) How do the dialogues in this film create humor by violating the Relevance Maxim of the Cooperative Principle?

(4) How do the dialogues in this film create humor by violating the Manner Maxim of the Cooperative Principle?

3.2 Procedures

This thesis will select the dialogue content with humorous effect in the film, and then make use of textual analysis to analyze it with the Cooperative Principle to study how the humorous effect is produced.

4. Analysis of the Creation of Humor from the Perspective of Violating the Maxims of Cooperative Principle

4.1 Violation of the Quantity Maxim

4.1.1 Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)

Annie: “Okay. This is grandfather.”
Hallie: “He’s so cute. What do we call him?”
Annie: “Grandfather.”
Hallie: “Why didn’t I think of that?”

This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of quantity—“make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)”. In this dialogue, Hallie asks Annie how they should call their grandfather, her expected answer is their grandfather’s name. However, Annie’s answer is not as informative as what Hallie requires, she violates the maxim of quantity and only tells Hallie that she can call him “grandfather” directly. This obvious answer makes Hallie’s question seem a little silly. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.1.2 Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

Nick: “Chessy, why are you looking at her like that?”
Chessy: “Like what? I’m not looking at her any special way. I’m looking at her like I’ve looked at her for 11 years. Since the day she came home from the hospital. Six pounds, 11 ounces weighs, 21 inches long. This is how I look at her.”

This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of quantity—“do not make your contribution more informative than is required”. In this dialogue, Nick asks Chessy why she is looking at “Hallie” in a weird way. At this moment, Chessy only needs to say “I’m not looking at her any special way” as her answer. However, she violates the maxim of quantity and her answer is more informative than what Nick requires. She says she is looking at “Hallie” like she has looked at her for 11 years and tells this Hallie’s birth information. In this plot, Chessy has known the fact that this “Hallie” in America is actually Annie, so her redundant information is actually for Annie. Knowing nothing about Hallie and Annie’s switching places, Nick feels at a loss for Chessy’s words and his confusion is very funny. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.2 Violation of the Quality Maxim

4.2.1 Do not say what you believe to be false

Annie: “Don’t you see it?”
Hallie: “See what?”
Annie: “The resemblance between us.”
Hallie: “Resemblance? Between you and me?”
Hallie: “Let me see. Turn sideways. Now change the other way. Well, your eyes are much closer together than mine. Your ears, well, don’t worry, you’ll grow into them. Your teeth are a little crooked. Ah! That nose! Well, don’t worry, dear, those things can be fixed.”
This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of quality——“do not say what you believe to be false”. At the moment when Hallie and Annie see each other’s face, they are both shocked by the resemblance between them, but Hallie says Annie’s appearance has many flaws. Actually, she knows what she says is false. She violates the maxim of quality. She is defeated by Annie in the fencing competition, so she attacks Annie’s appearance by saying what she believes to be false on purpose. Because she and Annie have the same appearance, her making fun of Annie’s appearance is actually making fun of her own appearance. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.2.2 Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
Hallie: “Tell you what I’m gonna do. I’ll make you a little deal. Loser jumps into the lake after the game.”
Annie: “Excellent.”
Hallie: “Butt naked.”
Annie: “Even more excellent. Start unzipping, Parker.”
This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of quality——“do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence”. Hallie and Annie make a bet that the loser of the card game has to get naked and jump into the lake. When they make the bet, Annie does not have adequate evidence to prove that Hallie is bound to lose, and the actual result also proves that it’s herself that loses the game. However, when they bet, she violates the maxim of quality and asks Hallie to start unzipping as if she has adequate evidence to prove that Hallie is bound to lose the game. Considering the result of her losing the game, her words are a satire on herself. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.3 Violation of the Relevance Maxim
Nick: “Honey…I wanna know what you think about making Meredith part of the family.”
Annie: “Part of our family?”
Nick: “Yeah.”
Annie: “I think it’s an awesome idea. Inspiringly.”
Nick: “Yeah. You do?”
Annie: “Brilliant.”
Nick: “Really? You do?”
Annie: “Totally. I mean, like it’s a dream come true. I’ve always wanted a big sister.”
Nick: “Honey. I think you’re kinda missing the point.”
Annie: “No, I’m not. You’re going to adopt Meredith. That is so sweet, Dad.”
Nick: “No, I’m not going to adopt her. I’m…going to marry her.”
Annie: “Marry her! That’s insane! How can you marry a woman young enough to be my big sister?”
This dialogue violates the maxim of relevance. When Nick tells Annie that he wants to make Meredith part of their family, in consideration of his and Meredith’s love affair, the most relevant interpretation of this sentence should be “Nick wants to marry Meredith”. However, Annie violates the maxim of relevance and makes a guess of “Nick is going to adopt Meredith” which is not relevant to the information she has known. In this dialogue, she violates the maxim of relevance on purpose in order to prevent Nick from telling her that he decides to marry Meredith. However, compared to an adult’s decision that has been made, a child’s prevention like this seems to be very childish and ridiculous. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.4 Violation of the Manner Maxim
4.4.1 Avoid obscurity
Chessy: “You got something you want to share with the class, there, Hal?”
Annie: “Chessy, you, you give me a fright.”
Chessy: “I give you a fright?”
Annie: “You scared me. I didn’t know you were like, like in here.”
Chessy: “Are you sure there isn’t anything you want to talk to me about? Like, why Sammy never comes near you anymore. Or why your appetite’s changed. Or why, all of a sudden, you’re neat as a pin… and using expres-
This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner—“avoid obscurity”. When Annie is scared by Chessy, she uses an elegant expression of “You give me a fright”. This elegant expression seems to be very obscure for Chessy and Hallie, who live in America and say casual spoken English. Annie, who is disguising herself as Hallie, violates the maxim of manner and uses obscure expression because of her speech habits. Her obscure expression makes herself abrupt and awkward in American culture and also arouses Chessy’s suspicion. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.4.2 Avoid ambiguity

This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner—“avoid ambiguity”. The word “we” is ambiguous in the absence of context. In this dialogue, the word “we” said by Annie means Annie and her twin sister Hallie. However, because of lack of context, it can also be interpreted as Hallie and anybody she meets at the camp. Annie takes herself and Hallie as a team, so she uses the word “we” subconsciously. After spilling the beans, Annie can’t tell Nick she has switched places with Hallie, so she can’t explain who “we” are, that’s why she violates the maxim of manner and makes use of the ambiguity of the word “we” to interpret the word as a different meaning with what she originally wants to express. This plot makes people feel ironic because the word “we” actually means Nick’s two daughters, however, he knows nothing about the fact and feels at a loss. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.4.3 Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner—“be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)”. In this dialogue, because of the miss to her father, Annie adds the word “Dad” in every sentence, making these sentences not brief. To answer Nick’s question, she can simply say “Yes, because I missed you so much”, but she doesn’t. Instead, she makes a long speech to say that a father is very important to a girl. For Nick’s question, her answer is not brief. She violates the maxim of manner and gives prolix speech on purpose to express her miss and love to her father without revealing her identity. In this plot, Nick’s daughter who has never seen him since birth tells her love and miss in front of him but he knows nothing about it. It is very ironic. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

4.4.4 Be orderly

This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner—“be orderly”. In this dialogue, because of the miss to her father, Annie adds the word “Dad” in every sentence, making these sentences not brief. To answer Nick’s question, she can simply say “Yes, because I missed you so much”, but she doesn’t. Instead, she makes a long speech to say that a father is very important to a girl. For Nick’s question, her answer is not brief. She violates the maxim of manner and gives prolix speech on purpose to express her miss and love to her father without revealing her identity. In this plot, Nick’s daughter who has never seen him since birth tells her love and miss in front of him but he knows nothing about it. It is very ironic. In this way, the humorous effect is created.
Martin: “No.”
Chessy: “No, no, no, no. I had no idea.”
Martin: “No! Madam. Absolutely no idea.”
Chessy: “Yes. Technically, yes. I had an inkling anyway.”
Martin: “Yes. I did know something.”
Chessy: “It’s their idea. It’s so sweet.”
Martin: “Hallie told me the story. I’m an old romantic, you know. You know me.”
Chessy: “So am I.”

This dialogue violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner—“be orderly”. When Elizabeth asks Chessy if they know Hallie and Annie’s plan to set her up with Nick, they feel panic because they actually know this plan and have helped the twins. Because of panic, their answers are not orderly. They first say they know nothing about this plan. In face of Elizabeth’s disbelief, they modify their previous remarks and say they do know something. At last, they admit that they know everything about this plan. This kind of inconsistent expressions is not orderly. Because of panic, they violate the maxim of manner and make disorderly expressions. These disorderly expressions show their love and caring to the twins, Elizabeth and Nick. Their kindness makes this dialogue lovely and funny. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

5. Conclusion

This thesis analyzes the creation of humor in the film *The Parent Trap* from the perspective of violating the maxims of the Cooperative Principle. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of quantity and does not provide enough information, then people in this dialogue will seem to be a little silly because of lack of information. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of quantity and makes his or her contribution more informative than is required, the redundant information will make people in this dialogue feel at a loss. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of quality and says what he or she believes to be false, then it is possible that this person violates the maxim deliberately to satirize others. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of quality and says that for which he or she lacks adequate evidence, however, the result turns out to contradict what he or she has said before, then what he or she has said is a satire on himself or herself. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of relevance, and says something that is irrelevant to the topic of the dialogue, then this person may seem to be strange and hilarious. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner and uses obscure expressions, then this person may seem to be abrupt and awkward. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner and uses ambiguous expressions, then ironic effect is likely to appear. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner and uses prolix expressions, then ironic effect is likely to appear. In this way, the humorous effect is created. If someone violates the submaxim of the maxim of manner and uses disorderly expressions, then this person may seem to be hilarious. In this way, the humorous effect is created.

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