

# An Analysis of Humor Produced in Friends from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

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**Abstract:** This research aims to analyze how humor is created through violating the four maxims of cooperative principle by using specific examples from an American sitcom, *Friends*. Also, it can provide us something to think and to learn when we want to create humor on our own.

**Keywords:** Humor; Cooperative principle; *Friends*

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## 1. Introduction about the Theory

The cooperative principle was put forward by Herbert Paul Grice, a famous American language philosopher, in his speech at Harvard University in 1967. The background was that people in daily life did not usually say things directly and they tended to imply them. Therefore, there existed a problem: How did people manage to convey the implicature? Grice noticed this and then found that there was some regularity in conversation. Based on this, he put forward the cooperative principle which included the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner. The four maxims will be elaborated in detail with examples in part II to analyze how humor is produced.

Humor is the quality in something that makes it funny or amusing. Besides, humorous language can not only amuse the audience and achieve the effect of entertainment, but also attract people to have a deeper thought because of its profound meaning. If you pay attention to your daily life, you will find that humor is almost everywhere and we often experience it by having daily dialogues, watching comedies and so on. In spite of its prevalence, most of us are not familiar with its psychological process and don't know how it is created. In these circumstances, the cooperative principle is surely a strong tool to help us analyze the process of humor production in dialogues and makes our analyzation much more professional and theoretical.

This research aims to analyze how humor is created

through violating the four maxims of cooperative principle by using specific examples from an American sitcom, *Friends*. *Friends* is a classic American TV sitcom created by David Crane and Marta Kauffman, which is about six friends living in the same apartment complex in Manhattan. It originally aired on NBC from September 22, 1994 to May 6, 2004, lasting ten seasons. In addition, it was very popular and ranked first among the 100 most popular American dramas selected by Hollywood report in 2015. In this sitcom, there are so many humorous dialogues and much of this verbal humor is actually achieved in violation of the cooperative principle. The following is some detailed analysis of this process.

## 2. Detailed Analysis

### 2.1 Maxim of Quality

This maxim requires us to try to make our contribution one that is true. There are two important rules to follow. First, do not say what you believe to be false. Second, do not say something if you lack adequate evidence. (Grice, 1975)

Rachel: Isn't it amazing? I mean, I have never made coffee before in my entire life.

Chandler: That is amazing.

Joey: Congratulations. While you're on a roll, if you feel like you have to make a Western omelet or something? (After tasting the coffee) Although actually I'm really not that hungry...

(S01E01)

This conversation happened in the living room after

the three characters got up in the morning. Rachel had just met Chandler and Joey the day before. She got up early this day and made some coffee for the two men with enthusiasm. Then Rachel acknowledged excitedly that it was the first time for her to make coffee and Joey asked her whether she felt like to make something to eat for them. From this sentence, we can see Joey really wanted something to eat as breakfast. But, after he tasted the coffee, he vomited and poured it because it tasted so bad. Then, instead of saying “The coffee you made tasted so bad and the food you make will not be tasty, either. So, I don’t want you to make food for us any more”, he told a lie that he was not hungry which indicated that he didn’t want Rachel to make food. But, we all know he was obviously hungry and definitely wanted something to eat. He said something that he believed to be false and this violated the maxim of quality in cooperative principles, so humor was created.

Phoebe: I can’t believe you tried to move the green ottoman.

Chandler: Thank God you didn’t try to fan out the magazines. I mean, she’ll scratch your eyes right out.

Monica: You guys, I am not that bad!  
(S01E06)

This conversation happened in their living room after Phoebe, Chandler and Monica came back to the apartment only to find Rachel had cleaned their house. Monica was not comfortable with the new arrangement of the green ottoman’s place made by Rachel, but she tried to pretend she was okay with the new place. Her old friends were very familiar that she had a little obsessive-compulsive disorder and thus the teasing conversation was created. Here what Chandler said was obviously not true and both them and the audience were clear that Monica wouldn’t scratch Rachel’s eyes out even if Rachel fan out the magazines. It was just a kind of exaggeration and funny ridicule of Monica’s obsessive-compulsive disorder. In this case, Chandler said what he and others believed to be false, and this didn’t comply with the maxim of quality. In this way, humor was created.

Joey: I play Al Pacino’s butt. Alright? He goes into the shower, and then, I’m his butt.

Monica: Oh my God.

Joey: Come on, you guys. This is a real movie, and Al Pacino’s in it, and that’s big!

Chandler: On no, it’s terrific, it’s...it’s y’know, you deserve this, after all your years of struggling, you’ve finally been able to crack your way into showbusiness.

(S01E01)

The conversation took place in their living room. Joey came to the living room excitedly and told his friends that he was going to take part in a very great movie. Among the actors, there was a very famous movie star that was Al Pacino. However, after being questioned continuously by his friends, he told them the truth that his role was simply Al Pacino’s double, the butt double. Friends all felt a little funny and embarrassed and did not understand why he was so excited as if he had got a big role. However, Joey still believed firmly that it would be the highlight of his acting career. In this condition, for the purpose to not hurt Joey’s dignity and excitement, as well as to continue the conversation, Chandler said what he thought was false, which was that the experience of acting as Al Pacino’s butt double would surely be a new brilliant starting point in Joey’s acting career. After saying these, Chandler himself couldn’t help laughing, and so did his friends for the reason that they were very clear about the untruth of these words. It’s obvious that these words created humorous effect by violating the maxim of quality.

Joey: So I guess you all saw it.

Rachel: Saw what?

Phoebe: No, we were just laughing. You know, how laughter can be infectious.

(Everyone is laughing)  
(S01E09)

The conversation took place in a coffee shop downstairs where the characters all like to stay. At this time, Joey just walked into the cafe from the outside and found that his friends suddenly stopped laughing when they saw him. Feeling the strange atmosphere, he immediately understood that his friends were talking about him and were probably laughing because they saw his STD advertisement and knew his present embarrassing situation. Therefore, he said the first sentence, “So I guess you all saw it”. It was very obvious here that Joey’s guess was the situation. But his friends pretended not to know anything about it at all at the moment. What’s more, they deliberately asked Joey what they were supposed to see, looking like they were feeling at a loss. Then they still insisted that they had been laughing just because laughter can be contagious. After saying that, both Joey and his friends all laughed loudly together for the reason that these excuses sounded so awfully weak and not convincing at all. We can see Rachel and Phoebe spoke some apparent lies out, which violated the maxim of quality. In this way, humor was created.

Monica: Ross, is he gonna live with you, like, in your apartment?

Ross: Yeah. I mean, it's been kinda quiet since Carol left, so...

Monica: Why don't you just get a roommate?

Ross: I dunno... I think you reach a certain age, having a roommate is just kinda pathetic-Sorry, that's that's 'pathet', which is Sanskrit for 'really cool way to live'.

(S01E10)

The conversation took place in the living room of the apartment. At this time, Ross opened the door, walked in and introduced his new friend, a monkey named Marcel, to his friends. He announced that the monkey would live with him because he felt it's been kind quiet since Carol, his ex-wife left. Hearing this explanation, Monica asked him why he didn't just find a new roommate but a monkey to accompany him. Then, Ross subconsciously answered it was because he felt when people reached a certain age, having a roommate was just pathetic. But before he had finished the word "pathetic", he realized that all his friends had roommates. Therefore, he changed the word "pathetic" to "pathet", which was Sanskrit for 'really cool way to live'. However, all his friends knew what he actually wanted to express and that the latter part of Ross's words were apparently not true. In this way, maxim of quality was violated and humor was created.

## 2.2 Maxim of Quantity

The "quantity" is related to the quantity of the information provided and it has 2 rules: First, make your contribution as informative as required (for the current purposes of the exchange). Second, do not make your contribution more informative than required.

(Grice, 1975)

Monica: Come on, you can't live off your parents your whole life.

Rachel: I know that. That's why I was getting married.

Phoebe: Give her a break. It's hard being on your own for the first time.

Rachel: Thank you.

Phoebe: You are welcome. I remember when I first came to this city, I was fourteen. My mom had just killed herself and my step-father was back in prison, and I got here, and I didn't know anybody. And I ended up living with this albino guy who was like cleaning windshields outside port authority and he then killed himself and then I found aromatherapy. So believe me, I know exactly how you feel.

(S01E01)

The three characters were friends and were chatting in the living room. Monica were persuading Rachel to

live independently from her father but Rachel seemed to feel it was too hard for her. Then Phoebe gave her experience as an example to prove that it was not easy to be independent. But the information she gave was too much and too detailed. She described her bad family background, her predicament when she first arrived in New York, and even the detailed job and body health condition of her roommate, which formed a humorous contrast between herself and Rachel because Rachel's situation was obviously much better than hers. In the conversation here, all Rachel and others expected was just comfort and some brief description of Phoebe's past experience. But Phoebe's words obviously violated the maxim of quantity and thus created humor.

## 2.3 Maxim of Relation

This maxim has one rule to follow: be relevant. (Grice, 1975)

Monica: Are you okay, sweetie?

Ross: I just feel like someone reached down my throat, grabbed my small intestine, pulled it out of my mouth and tied it around my neck...

Chandler: Cookie?

(S01E01)

The three characters were friends. Monica and Chandler were talking in the living room and Ross came over seeming to feel uncomfortable. Monica asked about Ross's health condition and Ross described his bad feelings in detail. However, Chandler suddenly cut in and asked Ross whether to eat cookies, which is not relevant to the topic Ross and Monica were talking about. It violated the maxim of relation and created humor.

Joey: Set another place for Thanksgiving. My entire family thinks I have VD.

Chandler: Tonight, on a very special Blossom.

(S01E09)

This conversation took place in Monica's living room at night. At this time, Joey sadly walked into the living room of the apartment and told his friends Monica, Phoebe and Chandler that he couldn't spend the Thanksgiving with his family as planned because he's on the poster of the public service STD campaign, which made his family think that he had some sexually transmitted diseases and thus they refused to see him. Hearing this sad thing, Monica and Phoebe looked at Joey sympathetically and quietly. But Chandler suddenly spoke and broke the silence. What he said was a line of a poem, excerpted from a collection of poems he had been reading and this had nothing to do with what Joey had just told them at all. In addition, the happy scene and atmosphere the poem

described and created didn't match the sad atmosphere of the conversation before, either. However, it was exactly the irrelevance and abruptness that caused dramatic comic effect. That is to say, humor here was achieved by violating the maxim of relation.

#### 2.4 Maxim of Manner

This maxim means to be perspicuous and it has four rules to follow: First, avoid obscurity of expression. Second, avoid ambiguity. Third, be brief. Fourth, be orderly.

(Grice, 1975)

Monica: See ya... Wait, wait, what's the deal?

Ross: I just grabbed a spoon.

(S01E01)

Ross was Monica's brother. This conversation happened when Ross was going to leave the living room and go back to his own room in the evening. And Monica just happened to come to the living room and then said goodbye to him. But she found something different with Ross and asked him directly what happened.

In the chat before between Ross and Joey, Joey compared dating with different women to eating different flavors of ice-cream and encouraged Ross to "grab a spoon" which meant to start to invite and meet other women. Here just a few minutes before the conversation between Monica and Ross, Ross had just invited Rachel out to date with him and this exactly meant "grab a spoon". However, Monica didn't know what this sentence actually meant because she was not in the context of the relation between women and ice-cream and the words Ross said were too obscure. This violated maxim of manner and thus created humor.

Rachel: Oh, he is precious! Where'd you get him?

Ross: My friend Bethel saved him from a lab.

Phoebe: That is so cruel. Why? Why would a parent name their child Bethel?

(S01E10)

The conversation took place in the living room of their apartment. After Ross introduced his new friend Marcel, a monkey, Rachel asked him where he got the monkey. Then Ross explained that it was his friend, Bethel, who rescued it from a lab. Then Phoebe exclaimed that it's so cruel. This sentence was actually ambiguous. Everyone and the audience might think that what Phoebe meant was that it was cruel to do experiments with monkeys in the laboratory. But, unexpectedly, Phoebe later said, "why do a parent name their children Bethel?" This meant she just felt it's cruel to name a child Bethel

rather than feeling pity for the background of the monkey. By violating the maxim of manner, humorous effect was achieved here.

### 3. Conclusions

All in all, these examples explain appropriately how the violation of the cooperative principle can bring about humorous effect and also provide us something to think and to learn when we want to create humor on our own.

Humor is an art and an indispensable part among human beings. Because of its existence, the world is full of joy and it can also be a bridge to connect people. Through the above analysis, we clearly know how the humor in some dialogues in *Friends* was produced by violating the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation and the maxim of manner intentionally. By learning the cooperative principle, we may understand the process of creating humor better and appreciate humor better. Besides, by understanding the cooperative principle better, we can understand other's humor much more easily and improve our language communication ability in real life, too. In the future, we can also create humor intentionally on our own in daily life to make our life happier and more joyful.

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