

# **When Incongruity Exists: An Analytical Framework of Humor**

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## **Abstract**

Since humor is a common positive phenomenon, the role of humor has been investigated by many researchers in various fields. From the perspective of pragmatics, most critical analysis of humor distinguishes among a few representative types, and one of them regards humor as a way to highlight and think about incongruity. This paper studies humor from the point of incongruity by applying an analytical framework which is based on the combination of three pragmatic theories: Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle, and Relevance theory. This theoretical framework provides us with the basic means of producing or identifying joking in our daily life or workplace.

**Keywords:** Incongruity, Humor, Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle, Relevance theory.

## **1. Introduction**

Like any of the other communicative interactions, humorous exchanges aroused most interest in various fields. The studies of humor in workplace, one natural setting, reveal that the positive traits of humor can be observed in simulated negotiations, especially in conflict management and negotiation (Maemura & Horita, 2012), or in the complexities of identity work in relation to different framework of power, in which employees can use humor to resist an organization's normative control (Westwood & Johnson, 2012). Most findings suggest that humor can be used to define group membership, strengthen sense of identity and emphasize gender construction (Plester, 2009). Therefore, humor functions a lot in communication, especially in the natural setting like the workplace.

While the studies of humor from the perspective of management focus on the role of humor in dealing with the relationship between the members, most theoretical studies of humor from the viewpoint of linguistics distinguish among a few representative types: humor as

superiority, humor as aggression and relief, and humor as a way to highlight and think about incongruity (Mayo, 2010). The last type of humor means incongruity functions as the starting point of humor and allows for more than a performance of insider knowledge (Attardo, 1994; Mayo, 2010). The incongruity-resolution model which is paramount in psychology and linguistics of humor (Dyrel, 2013) argues that contradiction exists in various kinds of humor which is generated from the perception of complicated part that includes the contradictory, unexpected or inconsistent relationship between elements of a matter, object, thinking or social desirability. The central theme of this theory is that the view of two or more unsuitable, inconsistent or incongruous parts or circumstances considered as united in one complex object or assemblage generates laughter (Attardo, 1997).

The term “humor” originated from ancient Greek medical science as a biological concept, and the study of humor can date back centuries ago. The following definition of “humor” gives us a glimpse of its salient feature of incongruity.

Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts of circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. (Beattie, 1776, quoted in Raskin, 1985)

The investigations of the functions of humor in workplace could be further evidenced and supported by the studies in linguistics. For example, from the perspective of pragmatics, to encode or decode a humorous message, both the speaker and the hearer should possess the required ability, or in other words, the successful interpretation of a humor involves a lot of things like both the speaker and the hearer’s comprehension and competence (Canestrari, 2010). This is not discussed in the field of management.

Therefore, this paper, based on pragmatic theories, aims to provide a new perspective for a further understanding of the role of humor in the workplace settings. Though Grice’s Cooperative Principle is criticized for its restricted application only in Anglo-American culture, and Relevance Theory for its not integrating of socio-cultural rules in the framework (Franken, 1997), the combination of the theories works. By the application of the overlapping of these three theories, this study tends to provide a tentative explanation of humor as an interaction from the viewpoint of incongruity in the process of production and interpretation. It attempts to move on from Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle, and Relevance theory, to a combination of the three, focusing specially on the feature of incongruity. An analytical framework for humor studies will be formed on the assumption that these three theories are complementary to each other and there are necessarily some connections between them.

## **2. Incongruity between Illocution and Perlocution**

In 1962, Oxford philosopher John Langshaw Austin explicitly described his Speech Act Theory, a major theory in the study of language. In his eyes, there are three senses in which saying something can be treated as doing something.

The first sense is we utter words, phrases or sentences “with a certain sense and reference” (Austin, 2002: 109) by moving our vocal organs and producing a number of sounds, organized in a certain way. The act performed in this sense is called locutionary act. For instance, when someone says “Hello” to us, the locutionary act performed in this situation is he/she utters speech sounds “hello”.

When performing locutionary act, we also at the same time perform such acts as “asking or answering a question, giving some information or an assurance or a warning, announcing a verdict or an intention, pronouncing sentence, making an appointment or an appeal or a criticism, making an identification or giving a description” (Austin, 2002: 98-99). Namely, when people say something, they don’t just utter the words; actually they also make clear their intention in doing that. For instance, when somebody says “hello” to us, she/he doesn’t just utter the words, he/she actually is offering greeting to us. This is the second sense in

which saying things means doing things. And the act performed in this sense is known as illocutionary act. Searle further explained the illocutionary act by classifying it into assertives, directives, commissives, expressive and declarations.

After the speaker finishes his conversation, the listener will say something or do something in response to him. Here comes the third sense in which saying something is doing something. The act in this sense is the consequential act which is called perlocutionary act. What shall be paid attention to is that the perlocutionary act is performed by the listener, no matter whether the act complies with the intention of the speaker or not. For instance, when A says “hello” to B, B doesn’t hear it and just walks away; or B hears it and says “hello” to A happily. In this situation, whether B answers A or not, it’s the perlocutionary act of A’s greeting.

Humorous interactions are speech acts in a sense. Speech acts are social, rather than linguistic, communicative actions, so different types of interactions have intrinsically different interactional effects (Geis, 1995). When Speech Act Theory is applied to the study of humorous effects, the analysis of the incongruity between speaker’s illocutionary act and hearer’s perlocutionary act serves as the starting point.

### 3. Incongruity between Utterance and Interpretation

Oxford philosopher Herbert Paul Grice (1975) put forward that people do not say things which “consist of a succession of disconnected remarks”, instead we will follow some kind of principle and lead our talks towards an accepted direction. The principle we follow is making “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”. And this principle is called Cooperative Principle, CP for short. Grice further explained the Cooperative Principle by categorizing it into four maxims as follows (Grice, 1975: 45-46):

#### Maxim of Quantity

- a) Make your contribution as informative as is required;
- b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

#### Maxim of Quality

- a) Do not say what you believe to be false;
- b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**Maxim of Relation:** Be relevant.

**Maxim of Manner:** Be perspicuous.

- a) Avoid obscurity of expression.
- b) Avoid ambiguity.
- c) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
- d) Be orderly.

Some people regard the Cooperative Principle as prescriptive, whereas it is descriptive. That is to say, CP is just like an unwritten law which is deep-rooted in people’s conversation. If we want to maintain conversation with others, we will surely try to follow these rules unconsciously. However, sometimes, we may break some maxim to uphold others, and then conversational implicature occurs. In Levinson’s (2001: 103) words, Grice’s point is not that “we always adhere to these maxims on a superficial level but rather that, wherever possible, people will interpret what we say as conforming to the maxims on at least some level”.

The terms “locutionary” and “perlocutionary” in Speech Act Theory can also be used to analyze Grice’s Cooperative Principle. Using these two terms, Attardo (1997) distinguished two different levels of cooperation: linguistic (locutionary) cooperation and non-linguistic

(perlocutionary) cooperation. When a maxim is flouted, the violation of the CP is only superficial and temporary, so much so that the hearer assumes that while the speaker is violating one maxim he/she is still fulfilling the other three. The Cooperative Principle is the foundational theory of the pragmatic analysis of verbal humor for sometimes humor arises from the flouting of any of the four maxims of CP, or in other words, there is incongruity between the utterance and interpretation.

#### **4. Incongruity between Optimal Relevance and Maximal Relevance**

After Grice released his theory of conversational implicature, linguists found out that there are some overlaps in this theory and they tried to erase these redundancies by simplifying those maxims. Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986) put forward their Relevance Theory, and the simplified theory goes like follows:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.

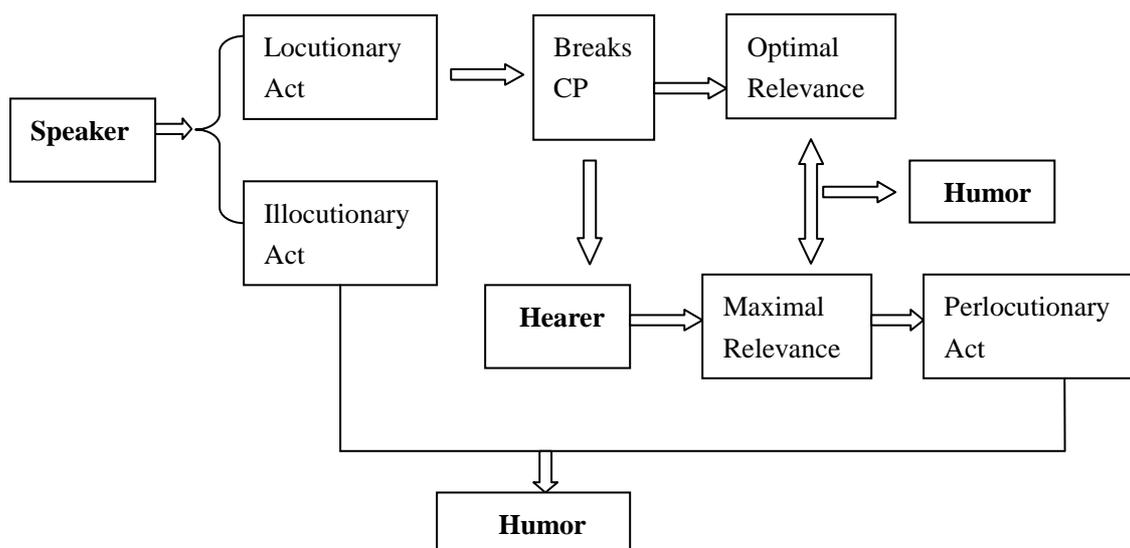
It is obvious that they agreed with Grice that communication gets involved with inference. However, they believed that the speaker has already expressed his intention of saying something and it is only the hearer who has something to do with the inference. That is to say, after the speaker performs the ostensive act, the hearer always tries to figure out maximal relevance even though it is not implied by the speaker. Referring to relevance, Sperber and Wilson argued that:

- 1) The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
- 2) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

Relevance Theory gives priority to the distinction between the optimal relevance and the maximal relevance. Optimal relevance is "adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort"; while maximal relevance is "the greatest possible effects for the smallest possible effort" (Jin Li, 2005: 26). The speaker always intends to provide the optimal relevance to the hearer, while the hearer usually tries to take the least effort to get the maximal relevance. When the maximal relevance is not consistent with the optimal one, humorous effect generates. Also the degree of the humor is in proportion to the efforts that the hearer takes to obtain the optimal relevance.

#### **5. An Analytical Framework**

Based on the discussions above, we can figure out that there is a logical connection among the three theories. That is, each interaction is a speech act which involves at least two interlocutors, one speaker and one hearer; when there is incongruity between the speaker's utterance and the hearer's interpretation, humor generates; when the speaker's intention of putting least effort to the hearer for adequate effects is inconsistent to the hearer's intention of acquiring greatest possible effects for the smallest possible effort, humor arises.



From the above graph, we know that when the speaker performs locutionary act, which breaks CP, he expects the hearer to get the optimal relevance, while the hearer tries to make maximal relevance which takes his least effort. Under this circumstance, the hearer's maximal relevance contradicts with the speaker's optimal relevance, and then humor arises. Another case is when the hearer's perlocutionary act is incongruous with the speaker's illocutionary act, humor generates.

To be more specific, the humorous effect can be seen from three angles:

Firstly, the incongruity between illocutionary act and perlocutionary act is introduced as an impetus of the generation of humor. According to the Speech Act Theory, there are three acts in this theory: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. When this theory is applied to the analysis of humor, the incongruity between illocutionary act and perlocutionary act is the focus. The following example can better illustrate it (All the examples in this paper are taken from the sitcom *Friends*):

**Ross:** Well, you know, monogamy can be a, uh, tricky concept. I mean, anthropologically speaking-  
(They all pretend to fall asleep.)

**Ross:** Fine. Fine, alright, now you'll never know.

**Monica:** We're kidding. Come on, tell us!

**All:** Yeah! Come on!

**Ross:** Alright. There's a theory, put forth by Richard Leakey-  
(They all fall asleep again.)

In the conversation Ross tries to talk about the monogamy with his friends. In fact, his friends dislike hearing him talk about the entire theoretical thing. So when he just starts the topic, the other five pretend to sleep. Ross feels frustrated when his friends do not care about what he is going to say. However, they still encourage Ross to go on with his topic. Hence, Ross picks up the topic again and talks happily, with the expectation that they will never do that again and listen to him carefully. But the reaction of his friends, which is called perlocutionary act in Speech Act Theory, rejects his expectation. Then the incongruity between Ross's illocutionary act and his friends' perlocutionary act makes him feel embarrassed. Whereas, by picturing the change of Ross's mood from frustration to happiness then to sullenness, we are entertained by the trick the five friends played on Ross.

Secondly, violation of any of the four maxims of Cooperative Principle produces conversational implicature which may mean humor. As is known, when people join a

conversation, they sometimes have to break one maxim to uphold the others. In the process of violating the maxims, the conversational implicature arises. It is when the conversational implicature is inconsistent with what we have expected, humor generates. When a speaker offers more or less information than the hearer requires, he violates the Maxim of Quantity. Take a look at the following example which explains how the flouting of Maxim of Quantity produces humor:

**Monica:** (On phone) Could you please tell me what this is in reference to? (Listens) Yes, hold on. (To Rachel) Um, *they say there's been some unusual activity on your account.*

**Rachel:** But I haven't used my card in weeks!

**Monica:** That is the unusual activity.

After meeting with her rich friends, Rachel feels depressed. At this moment the Visa people calls Rachel, and Monica answers the phone for her. Monica only tells Rachel that there is some unusual activity on her account without further explaining what the unusual activity is, which flouts the first principle, Maxim of Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required. Rachel thinks it curious for she does not use the card for weeks. Then Monica tells her the fact: That she doesn't use the card is the exact unusual activity. From this we can find out that Rachel used to use Visa card frequently, hence the Visa people think it queer that she did not use the card for weeks and even call to ensure everything is going on well. The call itself is absurd, and what's more, instead of disclosing all the facts at the first place, Monica does not expose the truth until Rachel complains about it, and the amusing effect rises up.

Thirdly, the incongruity between optimal relevance and maximal relevance is touched on to explain the generation of humor. When there is an incongruity between the practices of the two concepts, the hearer has to give up his previous thinking and make a brand-new conclusion based on the new information provided. It is when the hearer has to take more effort to make his maximal relevance consistent with the optimal relevance that humor takes place. Look at the following example to see how the Relevance Theory works here to produce humor effect.

**Phoebe:** You know, if you want, I'll do it with you.

**Chandler:** *Oh thanks, but I think she'd feel like we're ganging up on her.*

**Phoebe:** No, I mean you break up with Janice and I'll break up with Tony.

When Chandler complains he wants to break up with Janice but he cannot do that, Phoebe says "If you want, I'll do with you". Then based on what he said before, Chandler quickly makes his own maximal relevance: Phoebe wants to go with him to break up with Janice and backs him up so that he will not be afraid to do that. According to the conclusion he has just made, Chandler thinks it is a bad idea for he does not want Janice to take the break-up as a threat. Then Phoebe figures out that Chandler has misunderstood her and claims that she just means that she and Chandler break up with their own partner at the same time, which is the optimal relevance her words suggest. At this moment, Chandler finds out that he did not follow Phoebe and he has to overthrow his conclusion in the first place, and tries to get a new inference according to the new information Phoebe has provided. Here, the maximal relevance Chandler has made is inconsistent with the optimal relevance Phoebe has intended, and a childish and amusing Chandler stands before us.

## 6. Conclusion

This pragmatic analytical framework discusses the generation of verbal humor from the angles of Austin's Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory, focusing on their shared view of incongruity. The basic point is that any humorous exchange is a speech act, which involves at least two persons, speaker and hearer. And successful production and interpretation of humor depends on the speaker and the hearer's cooperation and their fundamental capability of coding and decoding the

incongruities in the whole process of interaction.

Incongruity exists anywhere in the interactional process which must be properly interpreted by the hearer. Firstly, with conscious or unconscious flouting of any of the four maxims of CP, speaker provides more or less information than is required, or says something lacking of truth, or offers irrelevant information, or makes some indistinct comments, and humorous effect will achieve only if the hearer can recognize it. Secondly, when hearer's maximal relevance does not comply with the speaker's optimal relevance, or when speaker's illocutionary act is inconsistent with hearer's perlocutionary act, incongruity occurs and humor comes after.

A pragmatic framework it is, this study contributes to producing and understanding humor in our daily life, especially in the workplace settings which demand both the employers and employees' sense of humor. As most investigations found, successful use of humor by the employees can resist the control from the employers without putting both sides into embarrassment. On the other side, appropriate joking may shorten the distance between the employees and the employers, particularly in the context of power. However, the boundaries of humor are socially constructed and the understanding of the implication of this boundary work is a relevant issue for both managers and researchers in the future.

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