

# When Incongruity Exists: An Analytical Framework of Humor

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## Abstract

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. Some examples are chosen to provide a detailed illustration and explanation of the theoretical framework.

**Keywords:** Incongruity; Speech act theory; Cooperative principle; Relevance theory

## Introduction

Like any of the other communicative interactions, humorous exchanges aroused most interest in the field of pragmatics. 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 [1].

From the perspective of pragmatics, to encode or decode a humorous message, both the speaker and the hearer should possess the required ability, which is among the pragmatic aspects of communication. Humorous utterances tend to be interpreted fully by the ideal hearer. However, the successful interpretation of a humor involves a lot of things like both the speaker and the hearer’s comprehension and competence [2]. Most critical analysis of humor distinguishes among a few representative types: humor as superiority, humor as aggression and relief, and humor as a way to highlight and think about incongruity [3]. The last type of humor means incongruity functions as the starting point of humor and allows for more than a performance of insider knowledge [3,4]. Incongruity theory 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 [5].

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 [6], still we can use the theories to make a tentative explanation of this complex phenomenon. This paper attempts to move on from Speech Act Theory, Cooperative Principle, and Relevance theory, to a combination of the three to focus specially on its incongruities and the consequences. An analytical framework for humor studies will be formed on the assumption that these three theories are complementary to each other and there must be some connections between them.

## Incongruity between Illocutionary Act and Perlocutionary Act

In 1962, Oxford philosopher John Langshaw Austin explicitly described his Speech Act Theory, a major theory in the study of language. The focus of his theory is in what sense to say something is to do something. 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” [7] 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, and the numerous like” [7].

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, expressives 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 consequential act which is called perlocutionary act. What shall be paid attention to is that the perlocutionary act is performed by the

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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 [8]. When Speech Act Theory is applied to the study of humorous effects, the analysis of the incongruity between the illocutionary act and perlocutionary act serves as the starting point.

### **Incongruity between Locutionary Cooperation and Perlocutionary Cooperation**

Oxford philosopher Herbert Paul Grice put forward that people don’t say things which “consists 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:

#### **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 [9] 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 [5] 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 in the interpretation 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.

### **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 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 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” [10]. 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 isn’t consistent with the optimal one, the humor effect generates. Also the degree of the humor is in proportion to efforts that hearer takes to obtain the optimal relevance.

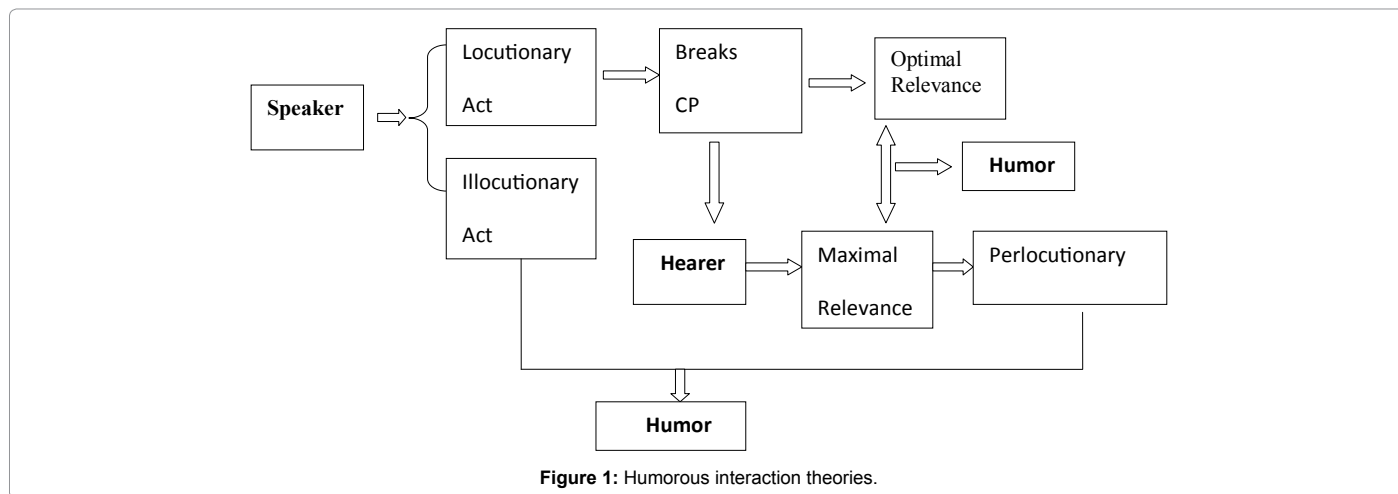
### **An Analytical Framework**

Based on the discussions above, we can figure out that each humorous interaction involves at least two interlocutors, one speaker and one hearer. Furthermore there seems to be a logical connection among the three theories (Figure 1).

From the above graph, we know that when speaker performs locutionary act, which breaks CP, with implied illocutionary act, he expects the hearer to get the optimal relevance, while the hearer tries to makes maximal relevance which takes his least effort. Under this circumstance, the hearer’s maximal relevance contradicts with the speaker’s optimal relevance and 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 analyze 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 discussion Ross tries to discuss the monogamy with his companions. Actually, his companions aversion listening to him discuss the whole hypothetical thing. So when he just begins the point, the other five claim to rest. Ross feels baffled when his companions couldn't care less about what he is going to say. Notwithstanding, despite everything they urge Ross to go ahead with his point. Henceforth, Ross grabs the point again and talks cheerfully with the desire that they will never do that again and hear him out painstakingly. While the response of his companions, which is called perlocutionary act in Speech Act Theory, rejects his desire. At that point the incoherence between Ross' illocutionary demonstration and perlocutionary act makes him feel humiliated. Though, by envisioning the change of Ross' disposition from dissatisfaction to satisfaction then to grim, we are entertained by the trap the five companions played on Ross. Secondly, conversational implicature produces humor effect, mainly focusing on the violation of any of the four maxims of Cooperative Principle. As is known, when people join a conversation, they sometimes have to break one maxim to uphold others. In the process of violation of 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 can produce humor effect:

**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 of maxim of Quantity: Make your contribution as informative as is required. Rachel thinks it curious for she doesn't 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 didn't use the card for weeks and even call to ensure everything is going on well. The call itself is absurd, what's more, instead of disclosing all the facts at the first place, Monica exposes 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. As we talked before, the priority shall be given to the distinction between optimal relevance and maximal relevance. And 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 hearer has to take more effort to make his maximal relevance consistent with the optimal relevance that the humor effect takes place just as Wilson puts it "Extra effort means additional 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.

Let's see how the Relevance Theory works here to produce humor effect. When Chandler complains he wants to break up with Janice but can't 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 doesn't want Janice to take the break-up as a threat. At that point Phoebe makes sense of that Chandler has misconstrued her and repudiates that she just implies that she and Chandler part ways with their own accomplices in the meantime which is the ideal significance her words proposes. Right now, Chandler discovers that he didn't take after Phoebe and he needs to oust his decision in any case, and tries to get another induction as per the new data Phoebe has given. Here, the maximal significance Chandler has made is conflicting with the ideal pertinence Phoebe has expected, then we will discover how whimsical and interesting Chandler's thinking is, the cleverness impact is unwittingly accomplished.

## Conclusion

Based on the previous studies of humor, this paper concentrates on the pragmatic analytical framework of verbal humor. Precisely speaking, it 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. Firstly, conversational implicature can be used to explain the generation of verbal humor. With conscious or unconscious flouting 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 then the humor effect will take place. Secondly, Relevance Theory and Speech Act Theory can also be applicable to explain how humor arises. Exactly speaking, when hearer's maximal relevance doesn't comply with the speaker's optimal relevance or when

speaker's illocutionary act is inconsistent with hearer's perlocutionary act, humor occurs. Thirdly, humor is ubiquitous in our lives. Also what lubricating oil to machine is what humor to society, it makes all the relationship go on well as we expected.

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