

HUMOR STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH AND VIETNAMESE SITCOMS FROM PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract - This study aims to explore how English and Vietnamese sitcom characters violate Grice's Cooperative Principle [2] as humor strategies in their daily conversation to create humor. In the light of Grice's Cooperative Principle, the conversational maxims violated as humor strategies in English and Vietnamese sitcoms are figured out to help EFL learners improve their English competence. Under the investigation into 300 samples from 26 English and Vietnamese sitcoms, we find out 12 groups. The analysis where the descriptive method has been used combined with the qualitative and quantitative approaches is carried out to find out similarities and differences of humor strategies in English and Vietnamese sitcoms.

Key words - pragmatics; humor; humor strategies; sitcoms; cooperative principle; languages.

1. Introduction

Sitcom, the blending of situation and comedy, has been more and more popular among people all over the world. It is also a good audio-visual resource for EFL learners. Humor in it has, however set up a lot of obstacles for non-English native audiences in understanding the humor in English sitcoms. It is worthwhile to study humor mechanism to help the audience have a better understanding and appreciation of humor in such TV series and meanwhile to help EFL learners improve their English competence as well. This being the case, the research attempts to study on the inner mechanism of humor within the framework of the theoretical perspective - Grice's Cooperative Principle and make some tentative explorations in this direction.

In order to achieve the above aims and objectives, the following research questions are put forward:

1. What maxims of conversation are violated to create humor in English and Vietnamese sitcoms?
2. What kinds of humor strategies resulting from Grice's Conversational Maxim Violation are used in English and Vietnamese sitcoms?
3. What are the similarities and differences in humor strategies resulting from Grice's Conversational Maxim Violation in English and Vietnamese sitcoms?

In this research, 450 episodes from 26 ESs and VSs (ESs and VSs in abbreviation for English sitcoms and Vietnamese sitcoms) are collected, 150 samples in English and the same number in Vietnamese are picked out for analysis.

One main feature of sitcoms is canned laughter. Therefore, for objectiveness, judging whether a line of sitcoms is funny or not is based on the occurrence of canned laughter in the characters' conversations.

For data analysis, three following steps are carried out: examining which conversational maxim is violated, under each maxim, determining which humor strategy is used, comparing and contrasting to find out the similarities and differences between the two languages.

2. Humor strategies resulting from violated maxims

Four maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principle [2], i.e. Quality, Quantity, Relation and Manner are used to examine how the characters violate the principle to evoke the audience's laughter. We also find out humor strategies which result from Grice's Cooperative Principle Violation and put them into suitable maxims. This study is outlined to give a look at frequency of humor strategies classified into maxims at first and then to analyze the humor strategies one by one in individual maxim.

2.1. Maxim of Quality

2.1.1. Irony

Irony refers to the strategy that the speaker expresses something that is completely different from the literal meaning in order to make fun of or tease someone else.

(2.1) Ms. Novak: *I have a painting, a sculpture and a photograph that I think you'll like. Here's the painting. This was painted by a Russian artist that I really like. It's called "Sun on the water". The artist was inspired by looking at the sea. What do you think?*

Cheryl: *It's fantastic.*

Marie: *How interesting!*

Bob: *It's very blue.* (Top Notch TV)

Cheryl, Marie and Bob are working in a travel agency. Ms. Novak who is a friend of their boss Evans talks about 3 art pieces for decorating the office. She shows the painting which has nothing but a big blue rectangle and a small red circle in it. However, Ms. Novak praises the piece with gorgeous words. The utterances given by Cheryl, Marie and Bob are appreciations of the painting, and these even appear to be an act of insincerity. As a matter of fact, their admiration statements are meant to tease Ms. Novak by implying that she does not have good sense of art. Thus, the comments "*it's fantastic*", "*how interesting*" and "*it's very blue*" are ironical expressions to ridicule Ms. Novak's sense of art.

2.1.2. Exaggeration

Exaggeration refers to the way that the speaker overstates the features, defects or the strangeness of someone or something.

(2.2) *Mộng Vân: Thôi nè, mọi người tới đông đủ rồi, bây giờ mình ra xe đi nhà hàng nè.*

Hoa: Ááá, bây giờ là giây phút trọng đại nhất cuộc đời tôi đã tới. Giây phút tôi mong chờ cuối cuộc đời đã đến. Trời ơi, tôi được ăn giáp mật rồi, tranh thủ ăn đi, ăn thửng nổi trôi rế, sau đó để cũng vừa lòng. Hà hà hà.

Mộng Vân: Ờ, thôi đi đi mọi người ơi.

Hoa: Á... á... (la lên vì đau bụng)

Mọi người: *Cái gì vậy? Cái gì vậy?*

Hoa: **Có một sự đau nhẹ.**

Mọi người: *Hà? Đau nhẹ?*

(Tiệm bánh hoàng tử bé)

Hoa is so excited with the wedding of her friend Mong Van. When hearing the invitation to the restaurant, she speaks out her excitement with exaggeration words such as “*giây phút quan trọng nhất cuộc đời tôi*” (the most important moment in my life), “*giây phút tôi mong chờ cuối cuộc đời*” (the moment I long for till the end of my life), “*được ăn giáp mặt*” (eat until my gall is bruised), “*ăn thúng nôi trôi rề*” (eat until the pot is pierced and the pot holder is drifted). The humor of the scene escalates to its pitch with her words “*Có một sự đau nhẹ*” (there is a little pain) which implies the birth pangs. The amusing exaggeration in Hoa’s utterances evokes the audience’s laughter.

2.1.3. Meiosis

The speaker makes up a meiosis in order to solve problems or avoid others’ accusations in an embarrassing situation. Meiosis strategy is seldom used in both ESs and VSs. Take a deeper look into some following examples

(2.3) Phoebe: *Oh, I didn't know you wanted her too!*

Monica: *Huh!*

Rachel: **Well, I mean, sure, of course. But... you already gave that to Monica, so...**

Monica: *You know, I would give her up, for you.*

(Friends)

Phoebe promises Monica to give her a painting which she makes by herself. In fact, Monica does not want that painting at all. Rachel does not want to tell Phoebe the truth that she dislikes that painting, so she is trying to think of a meiosis to avoid getting that painting. The incongruity comes from the discrepancy between Rachel’s lying and her real feelings. This incongruity can be resolved when the audience found that Rachel is making meiosis to let the chance of getting that painting slips away unnoticeably. It is the process that evoked the audience’s laughter.

2.2. Maxim of Quantity

In the violation of Quantity Maxim, we have two contrary strategies, i.e. (i) too much unnecessary information, (ii) less informative response strategy.

2.2.1. Too much unnecessary information

This strategy states that one’s contribution should provide sufficient, but not too much information. If speaker provides much more information than enough to be socially appropriate, he creates surprise for the hearer as well as the audience, and hence, comic effect is produced.

For instance:

(2.4) “*Has this... ever happened to you?*”

From today, dialing 999 won't get you the emergency services.

And that's not the only thing that's changing.

Nicer ambulances, faster response times, and better looking drivers mean they're not just the emergency services; they're "your" emergency services. So remember the new

number. That's... 0118 999 881 999 119 725.....3!”

(The IT Crowd)

Moss invents an emergency service which is in his idea much better than service 999. He makes an advertisement clip in TV which is transcript in (2.4). The audience cannot stop laughing as hearing such a long and hard-remembering phone number. Nicer ambulances, faster response times, and better looking drivers in the advertisement but too complicated number lead to non-stop laughing.

2.2.2. Less information response

Besides providing superfluous information, another strategy is used when the speaker provides less than enough information. This is employed when the director aims at stressing on the contrast between the characters or situations. Have a look into an instance of this strategy.

(2.5) Jen: *Guess who I'm about to meet now? Helen Bewley. Oh, come on. She took that football team to court for institutional sexism. Won massive damages and now she's head CEO of BHDR Industries.*

Moss: **Sorry, I kind of switched off after the word, football.** (The IT Crowd)

Jen enthusiastically tells Moss about her news. Since she is so excited, she speaks very quickly and floods Moss with information, in which he is not interested. Even though Jen considers her news very interesting and entertaining, she does not realize that Moss, who is certainly not the most social character in the series, would find her monologue unnecessarily prolonged. The viewers find the answer of Moss amusing, because they can relate to his situation that someone provides too much information on an uninteresting subject.

2.3. Maxim of Relation

Grice's Maxim of Relation requires the speaker to say something relevant to the context. Four kinds of humor strategies violating the Maxim of Relation are found, including irrelevant statements, icebreaker, changing the topic and “no offence”.

2.3.1. Irrelevant statement

Speakers may make some irrelevant comments in order to refuse to answer some embarrassing questions or to emphasize something or to tease someone. For instance:

(2.6) Monica: *What do you think?*

Chandler: **I think.... I think I can see your scalp.**

Monica: *Don't you just love it?*

Ross: *Ye... Yeah....**You got shellfish in your head.***

(Friends)

Monica just comes back from the hairdressing salon. She is so excited and satisfied with her new hair style, but her friends do not think so. When Monica asks her friends’ opinions about her new hair style, she expects to hear some good comments because she herself likes it very much. Her friends do not feel the same, and, as a matter of fact, they think that Monica’s hair style is rather weird. Nonetheless, they do not want to tell Monica the truth, so they give Monica some irrelevant answers when she asks for their opinions. Their responses do not match what Monica asks

for, but this kind of response is relatively safer in comparison with the consequences if they just go ahead and boldly tell her the truth.

2.3.2. Icebreaker

Sometimes people will say something that is irrelevant to the current context so as to avoid silent and awkward moments being produced between or among interlocutors.

(2.7) Bà Hoa: *Định lấy tiền của chị hả, đâu có dễ vậy. (vút tờ hóa đơn tình tiền)*

Ông Bảo: (tuýt còi)

Bà Hoa: Ủa, gió thổi mất tờ hóa đơn của tui đâu rồi ta. Đâu rồi, đâu rồi? (giả vờ tìm quanh) Ả đây rồi.

Ông Bảo: Trời lặng im như vậy mà bảo có gió, định qua mắt tui hả, đừng có nằm mơ.

(Tiệm bánh hoàng tử bé)

Hoa is embarrassed, she does not know what she should do and she has to say something to save the face. “*Ủa, gió thổi mất tờ hóa đơn của tui đâu rồi ta*” (Ooh, where has the wind blown the bill away?) are uttered to achieve the purpose.

2.3.3. Changing the topic

Speakers may change the topic of the conversation in order to divert attention from the current situation or to show that they are not interested in the previous topics.

(2.8) Chandler: *Yeah. I mean, this girl could decide against adoption or she could like another couple better.*

Phoebe: What are you gonna name the baby?

Chandler: *I can develop a condition in which I talk and talk and no one hears a word.* (Friends)

Monica and Chandler are telling their friends that they are not getting what they hope for by adopting a baby, because they know there may be a lot of difficulties in the process of adoption. Apparently, Phoebe does not pay any attention to what Chandler says about how difficult the process will be, and she just keeps asking some questions irrelevant to the topic that they are discussing.

2.3.4. “No offence”

The speaker says something to upset or insult the hearer, but the hearer does not feel insulted. This strategy is usually used in the interactions among friends, colleagues or people who have known each other. It is uttered to upset or insult the hearer but the hearer does not feel insulted, so it is usually embeded with hedges.

(2.9) Jen: *It's a date, I'm sure it is. Why else would he ask me out?*

Moss: *Well, don't take this the wrong way, but could he have thought you were a man?* (The IT Crowd)

Jen wonders whether her colleague, Philip, asked her out on a date or friendly night out. Roy and Moss speculate that Philip might be homosexual. Jen's question is rhetorical. She does not expect her colleagues to actually answer it, especially not in the way Moss does. Even though Moss uses the hedge “*don't take this the wrong way*”, he still tactfully suggests that Jen looks like a man. “No offence” is often used in the sitcom to create a lot of

funny moments.

(2.10) Trình: *Ủa, anh Huỳnh sao tới sớm vậy? Định tập thể dục ở công ty hả?*

Huỳnh: *Dụng cụ gì mà dụng cụ, cái gậy chơi gôn, ông nội.*

Trình: *Gậy chơi gôn hả. Trời ơi, đắt tiền lắm nha. Anh lượm ở đâu vậy?*

Huỳnh: *Cái gì? Cái gì? Lượm ở đâu á hả, mua đó.*

(Camera công sở)

(2.11) Andrei: *Chào hai bà chị xinh đẹp, hai bà chị dùng gì ạ?*

Maika: *Trời đất ơi, lại đây chị coi coi. Nhân viên mới đây đó hả. Đẹp trai dễ sợ không. Mũi nó đẹp ha, mũi thiệt không em?*

(Tiệm bánh hoàng tử bé)

In (2.10) and (2.11), with “no offence” strategy, the characters utter “*Anh lượm ở đâu vậy?*” (where did you pick it up?) and “*mũi thiệt không em?*” (Your nose isn't fake, is it?). If these utterances are made without hedges “*Trời ơi, đắt tiền lắm nha*” (Oh my god, it looks classy) and “*Đẹp trai dễ sợ không. Mũi nó đẹp ha*” (Wow, handsome boy! Beautiful nose!), they are actually insulting to the listeners. The hedges and “no offence” utterances create a contrast that amuse the audience.

2.4. Maxim of Manner

Three strategies violating Maxim of Manner: lexical puns, referential ambiguity, without brief and ordered utterance are found. Lexical puns are discussed with respect to the type of their underlying ambiguity: phonological, morphological and lexical ambiguity.

2.4.1. Lexical puns

a. Phonological ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity plays with sounds. It is a change at the phonological level that initially causes the dual meaning (Jojić, Olja) [5].

(2.12) Frasier: *Just as I thought. You bought the Diego sweater.*

Martin: *Well, what's the big deal? It's just a sweater.*

Frasier: *It is not "just a sweater," it is a work of art by Spain's famed master weaver Diego – who uses only the soft chin hairs of Andalusia mountain goats. Our sweater man could only get one this year. Niles and I made a pact that neither of us would buy it. (to Niles) You can't even keep a simple sweater pact!*

Martin: *Ah, Ronee – now there's a gal who can keep a sweater packed!* (Frasier)

Frasier and Martin are seated at a table of Café Nervosa. Niles enters with a GAP shopping bag. Frasier snatches the shopping bag and pulls out a white cashmere sweater. Martin teases Frasier. The phonetic pun in (2.12) is based on the exploitation of the entirely distinct but phonetically identical noun “*pact*” and adjective “*packed*”.

Phonological ambiguity can also be the product of phonetic similarity, not only identity. This is otherwise known as “paronymy”, the similarity in both pronunciation and orthography

(2.13) Bà Hoa: Trời ơi, mới sáng sớm mà gặp trai đẹp kiểu này thì chiều nay đông khách, làm mỏng một xiu luôn à nha. (Kevin bỏ đi, bà Hoa nín lại)

Bà Hoa: Kevin, có chuyện gì mà mới sáng sớm chị thấy em u sâu, xanh xao, xuống sắc, mắt xầu xí vậy?

Kevin: Để em yên đi, em đang chán nản lắm rồi đó.

(Tiệm bánh hoàng tử bé)

In (2.13), the audience laughs for the phonetic pun: the consonants /x/ and /s/ in “u sâu, xanh xao, xuống sắc, mắt xầu xí”.

b. Morphological ambiguity

The examples below illustrates the way reinterpretation is used to create humor. By eliminating prefix “de”, basis “filed” continues to exist as a nonce structure which generates humor. Consider the example below in the situation of Evelyn's house; Charlie used to date Tommy's daughter Olivia whom he dumped without explanation; Olivia shows up unexpectedly with Tommy at Evelyn's house

(2.14) Charlie: Anyway, Tommy seems like a real nice guy. I am very happy for you. Goodnight.

Evelyn: Charles. You are not going anywhere. This man is very important to me. Now, we are going to have a nice dinner, you are going to be charming and Tommy will remain oblivious to the fact that you defiled his daughter.

Charlie: Hey, she wasn't exactly filed when I met her.

(Two and a Half Men)

c. Lexical ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity refers to an individual lexical item which expresses more than one meaning. Meaning opposition is generated on the basis of the descriptive and figurative (or idiomatic) uses of the word. The speaker attempts to use this strategy on purpose to make fun of the hearer or to lead the hearer to interpret the messages in a wrong way.

(2.15) Trinh: Trời ơi sắp ơi, bữa nay sắp nuôi chim nữa há sếp?

Tài: Trời ơi, tôi đâu có rảnh đâu mà nuôi chim. Con chim này của ông chủ tịch đó. Ông chủ tịch đi vắng, nhờ tui giữ hộ đó.

Trinh: Trời ơi, đúng là chim ông chủ tịch nha, đẹp ghê.

Tài: Nè, đừng nói là chim ông chủ tịch, mà đây là con vật yêu quý của ông chủ tịch nghe hông.

(Camera công sở)

Tai and Trinh's intended meanings of the lexeme “chim” (bird vs. male sexual organ) are here contrasted to create humor.

2.4.2. Referential ambiguity

Referential ambiguity refers to a sentence or a phrase where the referent is not clear. This type of ambiguity will make the hearer confused about what the speaker really refers to at that moment.

(2.16) Jen: I've got Aunt Irma visiting.

Moss: Oh, do you not like Aunt Irma? I've got an aunt like that. (Roy and Moss look confused)

Jen: It's my term for my time of the month.

Moss: What time of the month? The weekend?

(The IT Crowd)

Jen tries to explain to Moss and Roy that she is a little bit grumpy during her period of menstruation. She uses the term “Aunt Irma” to deliver the message.

At first, Jen does not provide enough information, because she does not want to talk Moss and Roy openly about her private matters. “Aunt Irma” refers to menstruation as Jen's thinking and it also refers to an aunt named Irma as Moss and Roy's thinking. While Roy manages to decode Jen's message after she decides to specify her explanation, Moss does not get the meaning of her words. The audience finds it funny, because Moss seems to overlook the implicature.

2.4.3. Without ordered and brief utterance strategy

People sometimes do not talk in an orderly way because they are eager to explain something or accuse someone of what he did before or embarrassed with something.

(2.17) Beo: (slowly start talking) Kính thưa má, sớ dĩ mời má ra đây, giờ phút này, không có gì lớn nhưng mà phải chứng kiến có một cuộc họp đột xuất ngoài ý muốn của chúng con, nhưng không họp thì không được. Vì vậy, chúng ta phải họp. Hôm nay, ba đi vắng, đại diện trong gia đình chỉ còn có má, con muốn nói với má là... đã lâu lắm rồi gia đình mình không có họp, cho nên bây giờ mình họp lại để cùng cố trong thời gian ăn nhờ ở đậu ở đây. Trong lúc nhà chúng ta đang sửa thì gia đình mình ở độ bên này, có nhiều vấn đề xảy ra mà không ai biết, nó cũng không lớn gì. Nói chung là họp ... không coi báo.

(Gia đình độc-tò Beo)

In (2.17), Beo's family has a meeting on cutting down expenses. Just for the purpose of organizing a family meeting, Beo is so embarrassed that he says “họp” (meet), “cuộc họp” (meeting) 6 times without brief and ordered way. Besides, some phrases like “giờ phút này, không có gì lớn” (at this moment, there is nothing serious), “ba đi vắng” (Dad is absent from home) “con muốn nói với má là...” (I would like to talk to you that...), “nó cũng không lớn gì” (there is nothing serious) make the utterances disordered.

3. Similarities and differences

The results and analyses show that close relationships between humor and the violation of Grice's Cooperative Principle do in fact exist. It is found that a lot of funny lines can result from certain kinds of humor strategies which violate Grice's Principle.

As regard to maxims, it is found that in ESs, the violation of Maxim of Quality is most frequently used (42%). Second is Maxim of Relation (29.3%). Maxim of Manner contributes 20.0% while Maxim of Quantity makes up the least, 8.7%. In addition, in VSs, Maxim of Manner ranks top with 35.3%. Second and third are Maxim of Quality (28.0%) and Maxim of Relation (24.7%) respectively. Similar to ESs, the lowest is Maxim of Quantity (12.0%). Furthermore, humor strategies violating Maxim of Quantity count for the least in both ESs and VSs, 8.7% of ESs and 12% of VSs.

With reference to strategies, it is found that less information response strategy is the least frequently used

among all humor strategies employed. Its frequency is 2.0% in ESs and, similarly, only 1.3% in VSs. Meiosis, less information response, icebreaker, changing the topic and referential ambiguity make up a small rate, not more than 5% for each and under 20% for total.

3.1. Similarities

There are some remarkable similarities in humor strategies violating Grice's Cooperative Principle in ESs and VSs.

Firstly, looking at the result in the Table 4.1, we find out that there are 12 humor strategies and 3 sub-strategies violating four maxims of Grice's Cooperative Principles. All of them occur in both ESs and VSs.

Secondly, humor strategies violating Maxim of Quantity count for the least in both ESs and VSs. 8.7% of ESs and 12% of VSs are shown in the results. Note that all of the maxims can be violated individually, but some of them frequently co-occur. The violation of the maxim of Quantity is usually tied to the violation of the maxim of Manner, and this happens when a character either says too much, or remains obscure and does not say enough. In this case, we count for Manner. When people exaggerate, they violate Quality and tend to violate Quantity for saying too much unnecessary information. In this case, we count for Quality. Therefore, Quantity contributes the least in both ESs and VSs.

Table 1. Frequency of humor strategies in ESs and VSs

Strategies	English sitcoms		Vietnamese sitcoms	
	N.	%	N.	%
Maxim of Quality	63	42.0	42	28.0
Irony	32	21.3	18	12.0
Exaggeration	24	16.0	20	13.3
Meiosis	7	4.7	4	2.7
Maxim of Quantity	13	8.7	18	12.0
Too much unnecessary information	10	6.7	16	10.7
Less informative response	3	2.0	2	1.3
Maxim of Relation	44	29.3	37	24.7
Irrelevant statement	22	14.7	11	7.3
Icebreaker	5	3.3	5	3.3
Changing the topic	7	4.7	4	2.7
"No offence"	10	6.7	17	11.3
Maxim of Manner	30	20.0	53	35.3
Lexical puns	18	12.0	33	22.0
Phonological ambiguity	8	5.3	18	12.0
Morphological ambiguity	4	2.7	7	4.7
Lexical ambiguity	6	4.0	8	5.3
Referential ambiguity	5	3.3	6	4.0
Without brief and ordered utterance	7	4.7	14	9.3
Total	150	100.0	150	100.0

Thirdly, it is noted that Less Information Response Strategy is the least frequently used among all humor strategies to be employed. Its frequency is 2.0% in ESs and, similarly, only 1.3% in VSs.

Fourthly, Meiosis, Less Information Response, Icebreaker, Changing The Topic and Referential Ambiguity make up a small rate, not more than 5% for each and under 20% for total.

3.2. Differences

First, Quality in ESs and Manner in VSs make up a notable rate. The results show that the strategies of Quality, in ESs, are most employed (42%) and the strategies of Manner, in VSs, is highest contributed (35.3%).

Secondly, Irony in ESs and Lexical Puns in VSs are the strategies making up the highest rates. Each of them counts up to one fifth of the whole, i.e. Irony 21.3%, Lexical Puns 22.0%. Lexical Puns refers to the ambiguity in phonological, morphological and lexical aspects. Lexical Puns are common methods in arousing laughter in Vietnamese funny stories. Sitcoms are hence affected by this tradition. In contrast, Irony is used more in ESs.

Finally, there are some strategies which make up relatively converse percentage. They are Irony, Irrelevant Statements, "No offence", Phonological Ambiguity. The rate of Irony is 21.3% in ESs and 12.0% in VSs; the proportion of Irrelevant Statements is 14.7% in ESs and 7.3% in VSs; "No offence" is recorded at 6.7% in ESs and 11.3% in VSs; and Phonological Ambiguity is 5.3% in ESs and 12.0% in VSs.

The study of humor in sitcoms from pragmatic perspectives offer English teachers and learners a general view of humor strategies by violating conversation maxims in both English and Vietnamese. It would be a good reference for them in systematically understanding humor strategies resulting from violating maxims. It would help them recognize humor situations in order to understand the speaker's intention, hence to improve communication competence. English learners should know the purpose of each humor utterance, and realize the strategy that the speaker uses to create humor in every English conversation. With each specific purpose, the learners can choose the most appropriate humor strategies to communicate effectively.

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