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从语用学角度分析美国情景喜剧《生活大爆炸》中的言语幽默

Analysis of Verbal Humor in American Situation Comedy

*The Big Bang Theory* from the Pragmatic Perspective

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## Abstract

Humor has been widely used in people's daily life and plays an indispensable role in people's social interaction. It has been observed and studied from different perspectives for centuries. As the main form of humor, verbal humor is a lubricant of people's social interaction. It can shorten distance between participants of the communication, improve people's interpersonal relationship, make people physically and mentally pleasant and consequently contribute to the harmony of the society. Thus, the study of verbal humor is quite necessary. However, for most of the time, scholars from different research fields focus on their study of verbal humor from sociological, anthropological and psychological perspectives. Until 1980s, with the development of the linguistics and pragmatics, the research of verbal humor from linguistic and pragmatic perspective had arisen and developed rapidly. Yet, rarely do scholars apply pragmatic theories in the study of verbal humor in a sitcom. This thesis adopts two classical pragmatic theories, the Cooperative Principle, the Politeness Principle and a cognitive theory, the Relevance Theory to attempt to analyze the generating mechanism of the verbal humor in a world-widely popular American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* which provides the present study with rich source of verbal humor.

From the analysis of this thesis, we can see that the Cooperative Principle and the Politeness Principle have a strong explanatory power in explaining the generating mechanism of verbal humor in this sitcom. Many verbal humors in this sitcom can be explained persuasively by the violation of the maxims of the two theories. However, they are not perfect theories. To supplement the inability of the two theories in explaining some of the verbal humors in this sitcom, the thesis adopts the Relevance Theory to supplement the insufficiency of the CP and the PP and analyzes the verbal humor from a cognitive perspective. A lot of verbal humors can be analyzed by the incongruity between the maximal relevance and the optimal relevance. Though the RT has a stronger explanatory power than the CP and the PP in the analysis of the

generating mechanism of the verbal humor in this sitcom, it also has limitations in explaining some verbal humors. The author of this thesis finds out only with the combination of the two classical theories and the cognitive theory can the author explain well enough the verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory* and can people comprehend and appreciate the verbal humor in the sitcom more profoundly.

Being a preliminary study of the generating mechanism of English verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory*, this paper, to some extent, supplements the existing studies on the Cooperative Principle, the Politeness Principle and the Relevance Theory and may make some contributions to the richness of the study of pragmatic theories, which is of great theoretical significance. In addition, since the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* is tremendously popular among Chinese especially those who are learning English language and culture, the present study may be of some help for them to better comprehend and appreciate English verbal humor in this sitcom and consequently better use of verbal humor in social interaction, which is of great practical significance. However, there are certainly limitations of the present study and further researches are believed to be needed and to be of great value to the related study.

**Key Words:** the Cooperative Principle; the Politeness Principle; the Relevance Theory; English verbal humor; *The Big Bang Theory*

## 摘要

幽默被广泛地运用在人们的日常生活中,在人们社会交往中扮演着不可或缺的角色。人们很早就开始观察到幽默现象并从各个不同角度对其进行了研究。作为幽默的主要表现形式,言语幽默是人们社交往来的润滑剂,它可以缩短交流者之间的距离、改善人们的人际关系、还可以使人们身心愉悦,有利于建造和谐社会。对于言语幽默的研究具有很大的理论及实践价值。但是很长时间以来,来自不同研究领域的学者们对言语幽默的研究主要集中在社会学、人类学和心理学角度。直到上个世纪八十年代,对于言语幽默的语用学研究才随着语用学的发展开始兴起。然而,很少有学者将语用学理论应用于情景喜剧的言语幽默研究。本文运用语用学中的两个经典理论即合作原则和礼貌原则以及认知语用学理论即关联理论分析了当下广为流行的一部美国情景喜剧《生活大爆炸》,试图找出其言语幽默的产生机制。

从本文的分析中我们可以看出,合作原则和礼貌原则在解释这部剧中言语幽默的产生机制方面具有强有力的解释力。剧中许多言语幽默的产生都可以从对于这两个原则的准则的违反来解读。然而,这两个理论也有其局限性。为了弥补合作原则和礼貌原则在解读剧中言语幽默产生机制方面的不足,本文又采用了关联理论从认知语用学角度来解释剧中的言语幽默。剧中大量言语幽默的产生可以从关联理论中最大关联和最佳关联的反差来解读。然而,关联理论也并非完全适用。作者发现,尽管关联理论在解释该剧中的言语幽默方面具有更强的解释力,然而只有将两个经典语用学理论和认知语用学理论结合起来才能更好地解读《生活大爆炸》中的言语幽默,也才能帮助人们更深刻地理解和欣赏该剧中的言语幽默。

作为基于三个语用学理论对《生活大爆炸》中言语幽默产生机制的初步分析,本文在一定程度上丰富了现有的关于合作原则、礼貌原则和关联理论的语用学理论研究,因此具有一定的理论意义。另外,由于《生活大爆炸》在中国观众特别是正在学习英语语言文化的中国观众中的风行,本文也对于他们在理解和欣赏该剧中的言语幽默以及更好地在社会交往中运用言语幽默起到了一定的帮助作用,因此本文的分析具有一定的实践意义。当然,本文也存在许多不足之处,进一步深

入分析对于相关研究具有很大价值。

**关键词：**合作原则 礼貌原则 关联理论 英语言语幽默 《生活大爆炸》

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## Chapter One Introduction

### 1.1 The rationale of the study

The author of this thesis chooses verbal humor as a subject to study is firstly out of personal interest in verbal humor especially verbal humor in situation comedies. But personal interest is not vital enough for the author to choose verbal humor as a subject. The study of verbal humor is of great theoretical and practical significance.

For centuries, scholars of diverse fields have been attempting to define humor and analyze the underlined reasons of it. Nevertheless, most of these works mainly study humor from sociological and psychological perspectives. The study of humor from pragmatic perspective only can be traced back to 1980s when Raskin and Attardo first convey the related studies, which can be just considered a beginning of the study of humor from pragmatic perspective. The start of the study of humor from pragmatic perspective owns success to the development of the linguistics especially pragmatics. To narrow down, the proposal of pragmatic theories, including the Cooperative Principle (abbreviated as the CP), the Politeness Principle (abbreviated as the PP) and the Relevance Theory (abbreviated as the RT), contributes a great deal to the analysis of verbal humor in conversation of human communication, which in the present study is conversation in the American situation comedy (abbreviated as sitcom) *The Big Bang Theory*. The three theories mentioned above are of great importance in pragmatics and have been used to analyze the conversation implicature in interpersonal communication. Rarely has it been applied to analyze modern American sitcom despite its popularity as a TV genre which involves the fundamental element of the existence of pragmatic theories---language. This thesis attempts to analyze the generating mechanism of the verbal humor in the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* from perspective of three pragmatic theories and figure out how three pragmatic theories can serve as a new method to analyze the verbal humor in English sitcoms. Therefore, this study might make some contributions to the richness of study

of pragmatic theories, which is of great theoretical significance to the researches of pragmatic theories.

In addition to its theoretical significance, this study of verbal humor from pragmatic perspective in American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* may be of some help to Chinese audience to better understand English verbal humor since this American sitcom is tremendously popular in China. In the hope of studying English and learning western customs, a large number of Chinese people begin to watch English sitcoms including *The Big Bang Theory*. They fancy about the hilarious conversations and behaviors in this sitcom. Despite its popularity, there might be some obstacles in understanding verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory* due to culture differences especially different forms of verbal humor. Thus, this thesis can be of some help to Chinese audience better enjoy and appreciate verbal humor in this American sitcom through analysis of the generating mechanism of verbal humor in this sitcom on the basis of the CP, the PP and the RT. At the same time, hopefully, this thesis may acquaint Chinese audience of English sitcoms with some fundamental linguistic knowledge which would not only be of help to comprehend the verbal humor in sitcoms but benefit them in English acquisition. Therefore, the author of this thesis hopes that this thesis will not only improve the understanding of the verbal humor in sitcoms but also help with the application of humor in social interaction, which is of great practical significance.

## **1.2 The objectives of the study**

Humor has been widely used in various fields in human beings' life centuries ago and has been observed and studied as a unique phenomenon by scholars from different perspectives such as philosophy, psychology and linguistics. There are certainly reasons why humor has gained tremendous attention from scholars of various fields. Humor has been part of human life and its function is irreplaceable in human's daily life. It can be used to shorten distance between communicators and improve interpersonal relationship, which is of much importance to a harmonious

society. And writers, artists use it to create great works which are of great value to human history. Humor makes people laugh and keeps them in good mood. It is even used by psychiatrists to cure people who suffer from mental depression. But why does it have such a function? How does it work? There have been a lot of researches on these questions. However, few studies have been conveyed to study verbal humor in English situation comedy from pragmatic perspective. Therefore, the objectives of this thesis are, on one hand, to reveal the generating mechanism of verbal humor from a pragmatic perspective especially under the theories of the Cooperative Principle, the Politeness Principle and the Relevance Theory in this widely-spread American sitcom.

American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* has gained tremendous popularity in China now and has been widely spread among all ages of Chinese people. It is known for its special humorous effect in its way to express attitude towards all kinds of matters such as personal relationship, science discovery, politics, and sex and so on. It is one of the most popular and successful modern American sitcoms. Despite its popularity, people from different cultures may have some difficulties in appreciating verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory* due to culture differences especially different forms of verbal humor. Humorous utterance, as a dominant tool to convey the humorous effect in this sitcom, is much worthy of study to understand the generating mechanism of verbal humor in its conversation. It has been studied on its styles, uniqueness, science-related background which is before considered obscure and hard to understand among common people. However, few studies have been conducted to help understand the generating mechanism of verbal humor of it. Thus, this thesis can be of some help to Chinese audience better enjoy and appreciate this American sitcom. In other words, the objectives of this study are, on the other hand, to help the audience of this sitcom have a better understanding of verbal humor in this sitcom and consequently improve the practical use of verbal humor in social communication.

### **1.3 Methodology and data collection**

To achieve the objective of the study, appropriate data has to be selected first to

serve the study. Plenty of data is collected in the English sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* which the author downloads both subtitles and episodes via internet, including CBS' official website about the sitcom [www.cbs.com/primetime/big\\_bang\\_theory/](http://www.cbs.com/primetime/big_bang_theory/) and some professional subtitle websites like [www.tvsubtitles.net](http://www.tvsubtitles.net) and [www.shooter.cn](http://www.shooter.cn). Up to now, there has been five seasons of *The Big Bang Theory* broadcasted through TV and internet. Due to the limitation of space and difficulty, this thesis only chooses season one as the data source and confines the sitcom texts within a feasible range. As one of the most successful sitcoms in recent years, this sitcom provides abundant, up-to-date, rich conversational humor and non-conversational humor. The scope of data sources is restricted to verbal humor in the dialogues in this sitcom and all non-verbal humor has not been taken into consideration in the present study. A large number of dialogue examples of verbal humor in the first season are to be listed to analyze and interpret the generating mechanism of the verbal humor. The author chooses examples randomly from seventeen episodes of the first season as the research data of the present study. With the help of scripts of *The Big Bang Theory* downloaded from the internet, the author plays every episodes of the first season for categorizing and counting certain type of verbal humor. It is a time-consuming and energy-consuming process. The author takes the laughter in the sitcom as the indication of humor. And the examples of humorous utterance are accordingly selected and the whole corpus consists of 329 items of verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory*.

The present study adopts both qualitative and quantitative analysis, combining theoretical demonstration with data analysis in the English sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Based on the previous achievements and assumptions in pragmatics and three important pragmatics theories, this thesis applies the CP, the PP and the RT to analyze the generating mechanism of verbal humor in this sitcom. The qualitative analysis is to list the specific examples chosen from this sitcom and analyze them with a certain type of pragmatic theory in detail. While quantitative analysis includes summing up the exact numbers, the frequency of the percentages of certain kinds of humorous utterances under three theories, i.e. the CP, the PP, the RT respectively.

## 1.4 The organization of the thesis

This thesis consists of five chapters.

Chapter One, as presented above, serves as an introduction to the thesis, mainly including the rationale of the thesis, the objectives of the study, the methodology and data collection of the study and the organization of the thesis.

In Chapter Two “Literature Review”, previous humor theories which mainly include classical theories of humor will be briefly reviewed, followed by the accomplishment of studies on humor from linguistic and pragmatic perspective.

Chapter Three elaborates three main pragmatic theories, namely the Cooperative Principle, the Politeness Principle and the Relevance Theory which serve as the main theories to explain the generating mechanism of verbal humor in sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* from pragmatic perspective.

Chapter Four is the main part of the thesis with plenty of examples in sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. A detailed analysis of verbal humor and how humor generated in the conversation in this sitcom is conveyed. The analysis serves to further prove that the CP, the PP and the RT play a vital role in the explanation of the generating mechanism of verbal humor and in process of comprehension of verbal humor.

Chapter Five is the last chapter of the whole thesis. It is the conclusion of this thesis and sums up the main findings of the study and points out the limitations of the study and gives some suggestions for further studies.



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