



A Study of Verbal Humor in *Man with a Plan* from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

Jingjing Chen

School of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang University of Finance and Economics, Hangzhou, People's Republic of China

Received: 03 Jan 2024; Received in revised form: 15 Feb 2024; Accepted: 21 Feb 2024; Available online: 28 Feb 2024

©2024 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Man with a Plan*, starring Golden Globe winner Matt LeBlanc, is a distinct representative of American sitcoms. The language in the play is close to real life and extremely humorous. There are a large number of conversational fragments in all kinds of situations that defy the maxim of the cooperative principle and create unexpected humorous effects. This paper attempts to adopt the cooperative principle theory of Grice to analyze the speech phenomenon that violates the cooperative principle in the dramas and figure out the production mechanism of verbal humor and its particularized conversational implicature from the quantity, quality, relation and manner maxims respectively.

Keywords— *Sitcoms, Cooperative Principle, verbal humor, conversational implicature*



I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The word “humor” was first introduced in China in the early 20th century. It is a hot topic in linguistics and has a long history behind it. Humor is a verbal art that can create a harmonious atmosphere and maintain existing interpersonal relationships. In the last three decades, pragmatics, one of the branches of linguistics, has developed rapidly. With the development of science and technology and the increase of human communication, American sitcoms have become popular in China and have become an important pastime for Chinese people since the 1980s. Many people are also familiar with the term “American humor”. Therefore, more and more researchers are focusing on the integration of verbal humor and pragmatics.

Starring Golden Globe winner LeBlanc, *Man with a Plan* tells the story of Adam Burns, who becomes a stay-at-home dad while his wife returns to work and takes on the difficult task of caring for the family’s three children. The sitcom consists of one interesting life story after another, painting a vivid and interesting picture of a stay-at-home dad, focusing on family relationships and the children’s growing pains, which is a distinct representative

of sitcoms. The language in the play is close to real life and extremely humorous. When it comes to the success of *Man with a Plan*, verbal humor is an essential element. There are a large number of conversational fragments in all kinds of situations that defy the maxim of the cooperative principle and create unexpected humorous effects.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Study

This paper studies the verbal humor appearing in the sitcom *Man with a Plan* from the perspective of cooperative principle with the attempt to deal with the following questions:

- (1) How the verbal humor is produced by flouting the cooperative principle?
- (2) Why do characters flout the cooperative principle?
- (3) How can we use verbal humor in our daily life?

Verbal humor can be used for self-mockery, to conceal facts and for other purposes. It plays an indispensable role in everyday conversation. However, few scholars have studied why characters violate the principle of cooperation. And although many scholars choose sitcoms as material to study the production mechanism of verbal humor from the perspective of the cooperative principle, few of them focus on sitcoms that deal with

family relationships and raising children, such as *Man with a Plan*.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous Study on Verbal Humor from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle

In the twentieth century, a growing number of researchers began to analyze and study verbal humor from the perspective of the cooperative principle. Some scholars put forward theories on verbal humor and thus laid the theoretical foundations for the later research of other scholars.

Grice (1975) mentions in *Logic and Conversation* that people always follow certain principles in conversations to accomplish communicative tasks, and he believes that the cooperative principle that people observe in conversations includes four sub-principles. However, people deliberately violate the cooperative principle in order to achieve certain goals, which is called conversational implicature. The proposal of the cooperative principle has aroused great interest among researchers studying pragmatics and humor. Subsequently, many scholars have studied verbal humor from the perspective of the cooperative principle and uncovered the production mechanism of verbal humor. Hancher (1980) examines the mechanism of verbal humor from the perspective of the cooperative principle based on previous research and points out that many jokes violate the cooperative principle.

Raskin (1985) first proposed *The Semantic Script Theory of Humor* in 1985, which examines verbal humor from the perspective of semantics and establishes theoretical foundations, leading more and more scholars to combine the theory with the cooperative principle to study the phenomenon of language. Yamaguchi and Haruhiko (1988) admit that jokes usually violate the cooperative principle and that there is a certain pattern to this violation. Attardo (1993) examines the effects of violating the cooperative principle by combining the cooperative principle with jokes and concludes that violating one or more maxims of the cooperative principle produces humorous effects. Ruch and Carrell (1998) advocated a new perspective. They examine humor from the listener's perspective and conclude that a speech is not humorous in itself, but that humor is created by the way the listener understands and interprets the speech. They insist that humor is composed of four elements: the originator of humor, the humorous speech, the listener and the specific situation.

Domestic research on the cooperative principle and verbal humor is diverse. It is common to select literature,

films and TV series as material and then analyze the production mechanism of verbal humor from the point of view of violating the cooperative principle. The research material is diverse and include domestic and foreign comedies, variety shows, Zhanghuiti-style costume sitcoms, novels, etc. For example, *2 Broke Girls*, *iPartnentI*, *You Are the Onell*, *My Own Swordsman* are often studied, and many scholars choose *The Dream of the Red Chamber* as material.

There are also a number of scholars who research from other perspectives. They analyze the relevant phenomenon of translation transplantation of humor based on the cooperative principle and explore the application of verbal humor in interpersonal communication and business management based on cooperative principle, then discuss the methods and means of applying language theory by analyzing the role, influence and performance of the cooperative principle in discourse communication. In addition, Liu (2009) investigates the impact of the production mechanism of verbal humor on English teaching based on pragmatic principles.

2.2 Previous Studies on Sitcoms

Sitcom is a shortened version of the term "situation comedy" and has its origins in radio. The sitcom is thought to have originated as a form of comedy in the Golden Age of American radio (1920s to 1950s) and is usually around 30 minutes long. Nowadays, it is widespread all over the world. Over the years, sitcoms have changed a lot due to changes in styles, audience tastes and improvements in technology. They can reflect what is happening in the world and important events in history.

Marc and Newcomb (1996) believe that the sitcom is the most prevalent art form for contemporary American audiences. Xu (2014) argues that sitcoms, as a form of performing art, are intentionally created to make audiences laugh. Sitcoms serve as a practical tool and enrich the corpus conducive to the analysis and study of interpersonal and interactional humor from the perspective of linguistics.

Nowadays, more and more researchers have been studying sitcoms with fruitful academic results. American sitcoms are a hot research topic that arouse scholars' interest in linguistic studies, especially in pragmatics.

Zhang (2021) examines humor in *Modern Family* from the perspective of the politeness principle. In addition to verbal humor, some scholars take sitcoms as material to study euphemism, idioms and so on. Cao (2022) studies euphemism in *Friends* from the perspective of politeness principle. Zhang (2020), for example, conducts a comparative analysis of linguistic ambiguity using *Home With Kids* and *Friends* as examples. Dong (2022) analyses the linguistic phenomena in *Fresh Off The Boat* to

illustrate the Chinese cultural dilemma in American sitcoms.

From the above, it can be concluded that previous studies on verbal humor from the cooperative principle as well as on American sitcoms are abundant and have provided a solid basis for this thesis. Although many scholars choose literature, movies or sitcoms as material to find out the production mechanism of verbal humor from the cooperative principle perspective, most of them study adult interpersonal relationships like *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory* and rarely focus on sitcoms showing family relationships and children growing up, like *Man with a Plan*. They rarely focus on the linguistic differences between parents and children, which leads them to violate the four sub-maxims of the cooperative principle and contribute a lot to the creation of verbal humor. Therefore, the study of the production mechanism of verbal humor from the perspective of the cooperative principle still needs further development.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Four Maxims of Cooperative Principle

The principle of cooperation was first proposed by the famous American philosopher of language Grice in a lecture at Harvard University in 1967. Later, Grice (1975) mentioned in *Logic and Conversation* that people always adhere to certain principles in conversations in order to perform communicative tasks. He believed that the cooperative principles that people adhere to in conversations include four maxims, each of which contains a maxim and some sub-maxims. But people deliberately violate the cooperative principle, calling it “particular conversational implicature”, and many jokes are made in violation of the cooperative principle. More specifically, the cooperative principle consists of four maxims: the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relationship and the maxim of manner.

The maxim of quantity refers to the idea that the information conveyed in communication should meet the needs of both parties. It is a maxim that focuses on the length and quantity of information in a conversation, neither more nor less. It contains two sub-maxims:

(1) What is said should satisfy the amount of information required for communication.

(2) What is said should not exceed the amount of information required for communication (Grice, 1975).

The maxim of quality is a requirement for the fidelity of the communication. It attaches great importance to the sincerity of speakers. According to Grice, it also contains two sub-maxims.

(1) Do not say what you know to be false.

(2) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence (Grice, 1975).

The maxim of relation is that the information provided in a communication should be relevant or related to the topic. In other words, it requires that two parties should not provide irrelevant answers in conversation. The violation of the maxim of relations can be divided into positive deviation and negative deviation.

The maxim of manner consists of four sub-maxims:

(1) Avoid obscurity of expression.

(2) Avoid ambiguity.

(3) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

(4) Be orderly (Grice, 1975).

In order to make the conversation continue smoothly, both sides should obey the maxim of manner. They are supposed to deliver information and their views clearly, orderly, concisely and avoid using ambiguous expression.

3.2 The Violation of Cooperative Principle

The cooperative principle represents the ideal state of a conversation, but in practice it is not followed completely and unfailingly. There are many reasons why the cooperative principle may be violated. It may be that a speaker deliberately violates it and tells a lie to mislead the listener, or that one of the parties does not have all the information they want to convey, or that the speaker does not want to continue the conversation. And when speakers want to be polite, avoid embarrassment, create humor or achieve a rhetorical effect, they violate the cooperation principle and try to achieve unexpected speech effects.

A participant in a conversation may fail to fulfill maxims in various ways, which are classified by Grice into four categories:

(1) He may quietly and unostentatiously violate cooperative principle and tries not to let the listening party find out. The most common example is lying.

(2) He may make it clear that he is not willing to abide cooperative principle and does not want to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. He may directly say, for example, I cannot say anymore: my lips are sealed.

(3) He may face a dilemma: it is hard for him to fulfill the first maxim of Quantity (What is said should satisfy the amount of information required for communication) without violating the second maxim of Quality (Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence).

(4) He may blatantly flout a maxim to generate a conversational implicature. The speaker deliberately flouts a maxim, knowing that he has violated it, and also makes the listener aware that he has violated it. But his purpose is

not to interrupt the conversation, but in order to convey a new message to the listener which is conversational implicature (Grice, 1975).

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Quantity

The first maxim of the cooperative principle is the maxim of quantity, which governs the amount of information provided by both parties. Grice believes that the amount of information provided by both sides of the conversation should be just right, not too much and not too little. There are several examples in the sitcom *Man with a Plan* that illustrate how verbal humor is created by ignoring the maxim of quantity. Each example is accompanied by background information for better understanding.

4.1.1 Less Information

One of the sub-maxims of quantity is: "What is said should be sufficient to the amount of information required for communication." In most cases, the speaker gives less information to hide his true thoughts. There are some examples that explain the mechanism for generating verbal humor by providing less information. Look at the following examples:

(1) Background information: Don and Adam were called to the office by their boss. They were about to meet a very important client. The boss went on and on about the dos and don'ts and finally mentioned the dress code.

Teddy: Hey, look, that old guy just took a blue pill. And now that lady likes him. What kind of pill is that, Uncle Don?

Don: Oh it's a magical pill.

Emme: What dose it do?

Don: And we're out.

Teddy asked what the blue pill was. In fact, it was a pill to improve the sexual function of men. Don did not answer his question directly, but only vaguely explained that it was a magic pill. Even when Emme asked about the use of this blue pill, Don did not answer directly. The answer is meaningless because he did not tell them what this blue pill is for. To avoid embarrassment and to prevent the children from knowing what they should not know, Don did not provide enough information and deliberately violated the quantity maxim. His words and reaction to the blue pill provide a humorous effect. At the same time, Emme and Teddy had achieved their goal, which was to watch their favorite series. Their way of achieving the goal by asking a question about the blue pill also contributes to a humorous effect.

(2) Background information: When Andi couldn't find her wedding dress, Adam rushed to the bridal shop, mistakenly believing that he has accidentally sold it while cleaning out the warehouse. This dialogue took place when they rushed to the second-hand shop to retrieve their wedding dress without Andi's knowledge.

Adam: Where are your wedding dresses?

Clerk: I don't know.

Don: Do you even work here?

Clerk: Yes, but it's not my passion.

Adam: Listen, buddy, do you have wedding dresses or not?

Clerk: Some lady's in the dressing room trying one on.

Adam asked the salesman where the wedding dresses were in the shop, the salesman replied, "I do not know". Don's question is a rhetorical question, showing how ridiculous the clerk's action was, creating humor. When Adam asks again if there are wedding dresses in the shop, the clerk says that someone is trying on wedding dresses. As a clerk, he should have understood exactly what the situation was in the shop, but he achieves the goal of having more conversation with the customer by providing a small amount of information to elicit follow-up questions from the customer. Adam's dialogue with the clerk, who is so breathless in such an urgent situation, creates the verbal humor.

4.1.2 More Information

Another sub-maximum of quantity is: "What is said should not exceed the amount of information necessary for communication." There are some examples of this from the American sitcom *Man with a Plan*. In most cases, more information is given because the speaker wants to express his true thoughts and achieve a surprising humor effect. There are some examples that explain how to create verbal humor by giving more information.

(3) Background information: Without knowing it, Adam became a parent representative, and he was always forced to accept various tasks assigned by the teacher and organize various activities. Eventually, he couldn't stand the teacher and decided to transfer Emme to another class. Andi blamed Adam when he learned he had done so. The following dialogue took place when Adam asked the teacher for peace and tried to turn Emme back.

Adam: Oh this is gonna mean a lot to Andi. She's always saying how you're the best teacher in the whole school.

Teacher: Really?

Adam: Yeah, yeah. She told me that to get Emme in this class, she spent years kissing your butt.

Teacher: What was that?

Adam: That was a compliment.

Hearing how Andi praise her, the teacher asked “really?”. Adam replied “Yeah.”. That’s enough. But he added more. His words violate the quantity maxim of cooperative principle. His original intention is to prove how Andi praised the teacher, but he inadvertently revealed the fact that Andi spent years kissing teacher’s butt. Adam’s way of words gave more information that teacher doesn’t need. Thus, flouting the quantity maxim and humor is produced.

(4) Don: Hey, what’s with the suit? Looks like you’re selling pianos at the mall.

Adam: It’s Valentine’s Day. I’m taking Andi out because I love her. And because she told me to.

Don: Really doing it up fancy, huh?

Adam: Oh, yeah, yeah. I called three weeks ago to get us in at Staiano’s for dinner and dancing, pre-ordered their special lovers package for two, and had the truck detailed for when she throws her at me on the way home. I forgot nothing.

Don: Who’s babysitting tonight.

Adam: I forgot something. Oh, this is not good.

Adam said that he would go out with Andi on Valentine’s Day. He said he was doing this because he loved Andi, but he added later, “And because she told me to.” His original intention was to show that he had taken the initiative to prepare for Valentine’s Day, but his redundant addition of such a phrase violates the quantity maxim and has a humorous effect. When Don said, “You really make it fancy, huh?”, Adam replied, “Yeah, yeah.”. But he also wanted to show off what he had prepared, showing off how great and well prepared he was for Valentine’s Day, so he added a lot of detail. What he said is quite enough, but he added, “I have not forgotten anything,” which contrasts with his sudden realization that he had forgotten something. This redundant information creates the humorous effect.

4.2 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Quality

The quality maxim of the cooperation principle requires that the information given by both speakers is truthful and that no false or unfounded information is given. It is common knowledge that sincerity is an essential element to start and continue a conversation. However, it happens that speakers pass on information that they believe is false or for which there is no evidence. In the following part, the violation of the quality maxim is analyzed by means of some typical examples. Each case

provides relevant background information to better understand how humor is generated.

4.2.1 Intentional Deception

One sub-maxim for quality is “Do not say what you know to be false.” Some examples in *Man with a Plan* will be presented to explain the mechanism for the production of verbal humor. The main purposes of intentional deception are to suit the words of others or to conceal the truth.

(5) Background information: Adam’s client gave him two tickets to a ball game. Since he had been busy with his family and neglected his work recently, causing Don a lot of work, he felt sorry for Don and invited Don to go to the game with him. The dialogue took place when Adam had already agreed with Don but Andi mistakenly thought that the two tickets were a surprise for their wedding anniversary.

Andi: Oh my God! Steelers tickets?

Adam: Yeah.

Andi: You got these for us?

Adam: Well.

Andi: Because our first date was at a Steelers game. Oh, you missed me, too.

Adam: Okay, sure.

Andi: And you remember that Sunday is the 17th anniversary of that incredible day, and you got us these?

Adam: Apparently.

When Andi asked if the tickets were for them, Adam answered yes. In view of Andi’s surprised question, Adam concealed the truth so as not to disappoint her. To appeal to Andi’s feelings, Adam lied and admitted that the tickets were obviously for the wedding day. His words violate the maxim of quality. His original intentions are to hide the truth and make Andi happy. Humor comes from his four short answers, which show how upset and overwhelmed he is.

(6) Background information: Adam mistakenly believed that he had accidentally sold Andi’s wedding dresses while cleaning out the warehouse, so Adam rushed to the bridal shop. Lowell was assigned to cooperate with them at home to keep Andi unaware about the truth.

Andi: What? What is going on, Lowell?

Lowell: Nothing.

Andi: Doesn’t seem like nothing. Is it something Adam did?

Lowell: Nope. Nothing to report.

Lowell knew the truth, but when Andi asked him what was going on, he immediately answered nothing.

When Andi asked again and guessed, he answered nothing again to conceal the fact. He answered what he believed to be false and his words violate the quality maxim in the principle of cooperation. Humor comes into being in the process of his violation of cooperative principle.

4.2.2 Lack of Sufficient Evidence

Another sub-maximum of quality in the principle of cooperation is: "Do not say anything for which you do not have sufficient evidence." When communicating with others, speakers need to make sure they have sufficient evidence for the information they are providing. In sitcoms, characters often say something for which there is no evidence and which sounds like an exaggeration in order to make their words more convincing and thus persuade others.

(7) Background information: Adam and Andi were out for Valentine's Day and asked Katie to look after her younger sister and brother, and asked her to call if there was anything wrong. Adam reassured Andi that nothing would happen at home so Andi left with him. The following conversation took place when the power went out at home and Adam asked Katie to check the electricity box.

Adam: Just--but, uh, before you open it, bang your hand on the cover a couple of times to scare the spiders.

Katie: Spiders? We'll just leave the power off till you come home.

Adam: NO, no, no, no, no, if... if the power's off when Mom gets home, we'll never get our spontaneous life back.

Katie: What are you talking about?

Adam: You'll understand in 30 years.

Hearing that there might be spiders on the electricity box, Katie was afraid to check the breaker box, preferring to wait Adam to come home. To attain the purpose of emphasizing how urgent the matter was and to encourage Katie to check the breaker box, Adam said something he has no adequate evidence and used hyperbole to express how angry her mother would be if she knew about it. What he said violates the maxim of quality and audience would be amused by his exaggeration.

(8) Background information: Adam took his parents on a tour of their new home. As his parents refused to live in a nursing home, Adam had to lie to them that it was a residential house he had rented, when in fact it was a nursing home.

Joe: Why are there ramps everywhere instead of stairs?

Adam: Oh, uh, that's because ramps are the stairs of the future.

Andi: Yeah, yeah. That's right. I mean, in a few years, you're only gonna see stairs in a museum. And not to walk on, just to look at.

The nursing home was full of ramps and to dispel any doubts in the parents and prevent them finding out they were in a nursing home, Adam said something that was inconclusive. This was obviously something he had made up himself, and Andi did the same to Adam by saying something that was inconclusive. The urgent words they made up to cover up the lie and convince their parents that they were not in a care home have a humorous effect that strongly makes the audience engage with the humor.

4.3 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Relation

The maxim of relation is to ensure the efficiency of communication. It requires that two parties in conversation do not give irrelevant answers and that the information they give is relevant to the purpose of the conversation. There are two ways to violate the relationship maxim: giving irrelevant information and changing the subject.

4.3.1 Topic Change

Changing the subject is one of the ways of disregarding the cooperative principle that characters in sitcoms use to create verbal humor. The real purpose of changing the subject is to avoid embarrassment, questions and accusations. There are many examples of theme changes that we analyze in depth and explain the mechanism for generating verbal humor in the American sitcom *Man with a Plan*.

(9) Background information: The following dialogue took place when Andi and Adam had an emergency and needed to get home when they were stopped by a traffic police for speeding on the road. They didn't realize they were speeding and mistakenly thought it was because the alcohol on them as Adam had red wine thrown on his clothes before he got home.

Police: Well, I pulled you over for doing 50 in a 35, but by the look of things, we have a bit more to talk about.

Andi: Doesn't he look like a princess?

Andi and Adam sat perplexed in the car and thought hard about what excuse they should use to the traffic police. When Andi heard the traffic policeman's words, he panicked. "Does not he look like a princess?" Her attempt to distract the traffic policeman and avoid questioning is irrelevant to the topic and violates the relational maxim of the cooperation principle. By understanding the conversation, the audience can assess the creepiness of the character, creating a humorous effect.

(10) Background information: Adam concealed from Katie that he was investigating a male classmate she has recently become close with and followed him to observe

his behavior. He inadvertently mentioned the male classmate's name, so Katie started to question him.

Adam: The truth is, it's my... feeling that it's Royce's fault. I mean, between saving whales, walking dogs, he takes a selfie every four seconds. He's just too into himself.

Katie: How do you know all that stuff about Royce?

Adam: Uh, that's a good question. I did not see that coming. Uh...

Katie: What did you do?

Adam: You know, you are really starting to remind me of your mother.

Katie wanted to know how her father knew all this about Royce and what he had done. But Adam had a feeling that his behavior would make Katie angry. Instead of answering the question directly, he steered the conversation towards Andi to divert Katie's attention. His real intention is to avoid answering the question Katie asked and to avoid embarrassing himself. His words violate the maxim of the cooperative principle relationship and cause a humorous effect.

4.3.2 Irrelevant Information

Providing irrelevant information is another way of violation of the maxim of relation. It is a clever way of creating verbal humor, which appears frequently in many sitcoms. Although it is often confused with topic change, the major difference between them is that changing the topic creates a new topic of conversation and prompts it to continue, but providing irrelevant information often implies that the speaker does not want to continue the conversation, often leading to the end of it.

(11) Background information: Andi found that no matter what she did Adam would never be angry with her and this made her feel very insecure. So she concocted a lie and told Adam that she has recently met a workmate, Bob, and that she was dating him regularly. But Adam was still not angry, so Andi asked Mrs. Don to help her to see whether she can get any information from Don.

Mrs. Don: Has Adam ever said anything to you about Andi's friend, Bob?

Don: Let me think. Are you saying "Bob" Or "Rob"?

Mrs. Don: Bob. B-O-B.

Don: Todd?

Don used "Bob" or "Rob" to avoid questioning, and he used unrelated names out of context to create an incoherent conversation which generates a humorous effect. However, after Mrs. Don clearly spelled out Bob's name, Don still offered an irrelevant name. The two offers of irrelevant information indicate that Don did not want to provide relevant information on the topic and refused to

reveal Adam's thoughts. His words violate the maxim of relation and also made Mrs. Don understand his attitude and ended the conversation. As the conversation progresses, the verbal humor generates.

(12) Background information: Don and Adam were called to the office by their boss. They were about to meet a very important client. The boss went on and on about the dos and don'ts and finally mentioned the dress code.

Boss: So let's talk about our meeting, this week with the investors. It's critical you appear professional.

Don: I'll wear my tie that looks like a fish. It's a crowd-pleaser and very realistic. A seagull attacked me once. That's how you know it's a good one.

Adam: All right. I think we said enough here. Maybe too much.

At work, if your boss emphasizes the dress code before you are about to meet a client, he means that you need to wear a suit and not dress too casually, rather than emphasize the odd tie. But Don's answer "I'll wear my tie that looks like a fish." had nothing to do with boss's requirement. The true purpose of Don's words is to provide irrelevant information so that they can finish the topic and leave the office. His words violate the maxim of relation. In the process of conversation, humor effects are generated naturally.

4.4 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Manner

To ensure an efficient and fluent conversation, it is important that both speakers follow the maxim of manner, which contains four sub-maxims. Both sides should say something clearly, concisely and logically. The main objectives of disregarding the maxim of manner are to convey innuendo in conversation and to avoid embarrassment. There are many examples in the American sitcom *Man with a Plan* that can be studied in depth to better illustrate how humor can be generated by violating the maxim of manner in the principle of cooperation. Each case is accompanied by background information for better understanding.

4.4.1 Obscurity

The requirement of the first sub-maxim of manner maxim is that both sides should deliver information in a plain, clear way to avoid obscurity. It is essential that they should not say something that is difficult to understand or beyond others knowledge.

(13) Background information: Adam's family had planned to go to his parents' house for Christmas, but suddenly it snowed so much that they had to stay home. They failed to by a Christmas tree and prepare presents for kids on such a urgent night. So they cut their own branches and made their own Christmas tree out of drying rack.

Emma: I like Crafty Christmas, Mom. I think our tree's cute. It is, isn't it?

Andi: Who needs a fresh-cut tree when you've got Christmas spirit and Mommy's drying rack?

Emma: You have a nice rack, Mommy.

Andi: It's a drying rack, sweetie. You got to say "Drying". If you're gonna say "Rack".

The vocabulary that Andi spoke "drying rack" is too intricate and intellectually challenging for a kindergartener. It was an unfamiliar phrase to Emma and she was bounded to have no idea what it meant. But she knew by guessing and by the meaning of rack that it was referring to a drying rack. When she tried to praise the drying rack, she didn't know that "rack" should be used together with "drying" to refer drying rack. But in American slang rack means a woman's large breasts. If the speakers misuse those words which have different meaning, they will bring about funny mistakes and audience will get amused by the wrong uses of those words.

(14) Background information: Adam learned that Katie has recently become close to a boy, so Adam was worried that Katie will be hurt if she falls in love too soon. He wanted to have a conversation with Katie and express his thoughts.

Katie: Dad, why are you being weird?

Adam: I'm not being weird. Okay, look... I read in one of your teen magazines that you guys like to "Kick it". You know? And, uh and have a "Gab-sesh".

Katie: Dad, I'm not gonna have a gab-sesh with you.

Adam could have just said I want to talk to you. However, he used the word "kick it" and "gab-sesh" to make himself appear close to the young man and not to have a generation gap. But from Katie's point of view, the word "gab-sesh" is a peer-to-peer communication, and she cannot understand her father's intentions. To her, Adam's words were obscure. Adam flouts the maxim of manner of cooperative principle. Humor is generated by the use of an obscure word.

4.4.2 Ambiguity

One of the maxims of manner is the avoidance of ambiguity. Both sides are supposed to say something clearly. When some ambiguous words are used in the conversation which can be interpreted into different meaning, the speakers may be want to deliver some conversational implicatures, thus some humorous effects are created.

(15) Background information: Emma's nursery school started and Adam went to the opening ceremony. There were a few male parents among a bunch of female

parents. So when Lowell saw Adam coming, he tried to talk to Adam.

Lowell: Sorry, I'm a little revved up. I just can't believe they're not introducing any foreign language in kindergarten. How can our children compete in a global economy without fluency in a second language?

Adam: You know this school is free, right? Free stuff is not that great. Water is free, but beer you got to pay for. Hm?

Lowell: Beer. It's so great to connect on a masculine level again.

Adam was meant to use the example of water and beer to illustrate that they should not expect a free school to teach a second foreign language. But beer is not just a drink, it also represents a way of building friendships between men. So Lowell caught the presence of the word "beer" and mistakenly thought Adam was trying to make friends with him, which was exactly what he wanted. The example of water and beer violates the maxim of manner of cooperative principle which causes ambiguous meaning. The humor is produced due to the listener's misunderstanding of the word.

(16) Background information: Learning that Katie and Royce had recently become close, Adam stalked Royce, mistaking him for a playboy. He made appointment with Royce and intimidated him in an attempt to make Royce consciously stay away from Katie.

Adam: "Make the right choice. Call Royce." Is that what you tell all the girls?

Royce: What?

Adam: All right? You know my wife, you know my daughter. Now, it's time for you to get to know me. For instance, one of my hobbies is I like to take walks in the woods and bury things in holes. Sometime I take one thing, cut it up, and bury it in different holes. Depends on my mood.

Instead of directly telling Royce to stay away from Katie, nor did Adam directly say what the consequences would be if Royce didn't stay away from Katie, he indirectly "threatened" Royce by expressing his hobbies. This kind of indirect way of conveying conversational implicatures violates the maxim of manner of cooperative principle, making the listener get the conversational implicature without being embarrassed. In the process of understanding the conversation, the audience will understand the humor of the dialogue

4.4.3 Unnecessary Prolixity

The avoidance of lengthy is also one of the requirements of the maxim of manner of cooperative principle. However, in daily life, people often repeat some

words, phrases, sentences to emphasize their purposes or use different expressions to convey the same meaning

(17) Background information: Adam and Andi were discussing Katie and Royce's affair and Adam had threatened Royce to stay away from Katie because he mistakenly thought Royce was a playboy. Learning this, Katie became furious, so after discussion, they agreed to stop interfering with Katie's social life.

Adam: But I still think he's a player.

Andi: He's not a player. And I have news for you, you are not a player anymore, either-- you are a dad.

Adam: You take that back!

Andi: Oh, come on.

Adam: Take it back. Take it back.

In the conversation, when Andi mentioned that Adam was not a player anymore, Adam felt unhappy because he didn't want to admit that he was getting old. But he had only need to answer "Take that back" to show his attitude. However, he repeated two times again. His repetition of the same meaning of phrases let the audience feel how anxious he was. Adam's words violate the maxim of manner by repetition and produces verbal humor.

(18) Background information: Katie told her parents that she was doing her homework in the library. But when Adam and Andi went to pick Emme up from school they found that the library was closed. They questioned Katie again and Katie still stated that she was in the library doing her homework. The following conversation took place when Katie returned home and Adam and Andi questioned Katie's whereabouts.

Adam: We went to the library to look for you, but you weren't there.

Katie: Wait, you guys are checking up on me? I'm 14, I don't need you guys looking over my shoulder all the time.

Adam: Oh, yes, you do. As someone who was 14 once, I can tell you from experience that you are not smart.

Andi: I mean, it's not your fault. Your brain's just not fully formed yet. It's like Jell-O before you put it in the fridge.

Adam: Yeah, you open a 14-year-old brain, it's just a clown in there pulling levers.

From the above conversation, we can know that Andi and Adam were trying to convey that Katie was only 14 years old and had not yet grown into a mentally and physically adult and that they still need to care for Katie's safety. They expressed in different ways to describe the brain of a 14-year-old, for example, it's like Jell-O before you put it in the fridge or it's just a clown in there pulling

levers, to convey the same meaning. Their ways of expression violate the maxim of manner in the principle of cooperation, and in the process of understanding the conversation, audience can know how humor is generated.

4.4.4 Disorder

It's known to all that "Be orderly" is one of requirements of the maxim of manner of cooperative principle. Disorder is the violation of fourth sub-maxim of manner. In our daily life, it is common for people to incoherently convey information, especially in emergency situation or they may provide disorderly language intentionally to create humorous atmosphere. Paradox is a relatively common way of violating the maxim of manner.

(19) Background information: Emme's kindergarten was having a party on Thanksgiving Day and as the parent representative, Adam needed to prepare the party himself. In previous year, Andi had prepared it, so neither the teacher nor Andi trusted Adam to complete the task. The following conversation took place when the kindergarten teacher secretly sent Andi the preparations for the Thanksgiving party.

Adam: Now, why would she do that?

Andi: Well, because, I... She...somebody asked her to do it, I...

Adam: I haven't even screwed anything up yet, and you're already sticking your nose in. You know what I think? I think you're the one with the problem. Not me.

Andi: Oh, that is so ridiculous, I can't even laugh. Oh, no. Wait. Yes, I can. You're so off.

When Adam asked the reason why the teacher did that, Andi's answer was disorderly and she was very hesitant because she was the one who didn't trust Adam and asked the teacher to send him the content related to the Thanksgiving party. Later she said "I can't even laugh" and "Wait. Yes, I can.". What she said was inconsistent and paradoxical, and violates the maxim of manner. The audience will understand how humor is generated after understanding the meaning of conversation.

(20) Background information: Andi and Mrs. Don quarreled over a conflict they had when they were at school. The following conversation took place when Adam and Don created an opportunity for them to make up. Unexpectedly, Mrs. Don accused Andi of making a big deal out of it and Andi got angry and asked Adam if she was overreacting.

Mrs. Don: She's completely overreacting again.

Andi: Overreact--uh. A-Are you hearing this? Do you think I'm overreacting?

Adam: Me? Uh...Do I think you're overreacting?

Andi: Adam?

Adam: Well, you are reacting. And it's definitely not too little. It's... Well, there's underreacting. Right? Then there's regular reacting. You know. Then there's, uh...you.

Andi: That means over!

Adam: I never said it!

Faced with Andi's questioning, Adam was so flustered that he needed to think of an answer in a very short space of time that would satisfy Andi and make her realize her mistake. At the same time, he was afraid that his words would make Andi angry and thus make the situation even more awkward. In his haste he was incoherent and spoke without logic, and what he said can show how torn and hesitant he was. This way of expression violates the maxim of manner. The audience will know how humor is generated in the process of understanding the meaning of conversation.

V. CONCLUSION

In this paper, an in-depth analysis of the humorous language phenomena in *Man with a Plan* is undertaken from the perspective of the cooperative principle. The focus is on the analysis of verbal humor that violates the maxim of cooperative principle in the sitcom in order to summarize the mechanism for the production of verbal humor and the true aims of the speakers. Based on an in-depth analysis, the author draws the following conclusions:

First, as far as the quantity maxim is concerned, humor is produced by providing more or less information. As far as the quality maxim is concerned, a humorous atmosphere is usually created by deliberate deception or by making statements without evidence. Also, from a relational point of view, there are two ways to trigger humor: changing the subject and giving irrelevant information. In addition, an unclear, ambiguous, disordered and redundant statement can also have a humorous effect. Based on the four maxims of the cooperative principle, various rhetorical devices are used, including the rhetorical question, exaggeration, repetition and so on.

Second, there are various reasons for disregarding the four maxims of the cooperative principle in all kinds of situations. When people disregard the maxim of quantity, in most cases they are concerned with hiding their true thoughts, showing something or proving their point. When people disregard the maxim of quality, the reason may be that they want to conform to the words of others, hide the truth or strengthen their power of persuasion. When people disregard the maxim of relationship, it is because they want to avoid embarrassment or end the conversation. So

they change the subject or give irrelevant information. When people flout the maxim of manner, they probably want to provide conversational implicatures to avoid embarrassment or to emphasize their views.

Third, as for the theme of this sitcom, it is about children's coming-of-age stories and revolves around three children in kindergarten, primary school and high school. Apart from the happy stories between parents and friends and between parents and children, which deserve attention, the communication between parents and children is also remarkable. According to the above analysis, differences in vocabulary, grammar and order between parents and children can cause their conversations to violate the principles of cooperation, which can lead to misunderstandings and have a humorous effect.

Last but not least, violating the principle of cooperation does a lot to avoid embarrassment and create verbal humor. Cultural differences are a topic that cannot be neglected nowadays, as exchanges between countries around the world are becoming more frequent. By understanding Grice's principle of cooperation and analyzing how verbal humor is created, people can apply some humorous skills in daily life to have a humorous and cheerful conversation and promote interpersonal relationships. It is also good for language students to enhance their pragmatic knowledge and cultivate their ability to apply the cooperative principle in their studies.

REFERENCES

- [1] Attardo, S. Violation of conversational maxims and cooperation: The case of jokes [J]. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1993, 19(6), 537-558.
- [2] Attardo, S., & Raskin, V. Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model [J]. *Humor*, 1991, 4(3-4), 293-347.
- [3] Grice, H.P. *Logic and conversation* [M]. New York: *Academic Press*, 1975: 41-58.
- [4] Hancher, M. How to Play Games with Words: Speech Act Jokes [J]. *Journal of Literary Semantics*, 1980, 9(1), 20-29.
- [5] Marc, D., & Newcomb, H. *Demographic vistas* [M]. Philadelphia: *University of Pennsylvania Press*, 1996, 20-21.
- [6] Raskin, V. Semantic Mechanisms of Humor [J]. *Synthese Language Library*, 1985, 5(4), 409-415.
- [7] Ruch W., & Carrell, A. Trait cheerfulness and the sense of humour [J]. *Personality & Individual Differences*, 1998, 24(4), 551-558.
- [8] Yamaguchi, & Haruhiko. How to pull strings with words Deceptive violations in the garden-path joke [J]. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 1998, 12(3), 323-337.
- [9] Cao Xi. An Analysis of Euphemisms Based on the Principle of Politeness: A Case Study of Seasons 1 and 10 of *Friends*[J]. *Overseas English*, 2022, (15), 54-55.

- [10] Dong Wei. The cultural dilemma of Chinese Americans in American sitcoms[J]. *Xinjishi*, 2022, (11), 85-89.
- [11] Liu Naishi. An Experimental Analysis of the Principle of Pragmatic Cooperation in Humor[J]. *Research On Education Tsinghua University*, 2002, (S1), 140-144.
- [12] Liu Li. The Mechanisms of English Humor Generation and Implications for English Teaching--Based on the Perspective of Discourse Use[J]. *Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education*, 2009, (07), 190-192.
- [13] Xu, Z. Contextual dimensions in interactional humour: How humour is practiced in selected American and Chinese situation comedies[J]. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 2014, 60(1), 24-35.
- [14] Zhang Sai. A Study of American Sitcom Humor Based on the Principle of Politeness: A Case Study of Modern Family[J]. *Journal of Tasting the Classics*, 2021, (10), 58-61.
- [15] Zhang Wenjing. A Comparative Analysis of the Ambiguity of English and Chinese Languages: A Case Study of the Chinese and American Sitcoms Family with Children and Friends[J]. *English Square*, 2020, (32), 53-56.