A Pragmatic Analysis of Humor in Contemporary American Situation Comedy: a Case Study of “The Big Bang Theory”

Ming CHENG¹, Xiaofang SHENG²
1Zhejiang University of Water Resources and Electric Power
2Zhuo Yue Language School

Abstract: Humor, as an enduring research topic, the earliest research on which can be back to the era of Platon and Aristotle in Ancient Greece. Since then scholars from different areas use different methods to study humor, summed up many theories on humor from various perspectives, such as linguistics, rhetoric and aesthetics, philosophy and sociology. This paper starting from the violation of the cooperative principle and politeness principle point of view, to study the humor in modern American sitcoms, aims to reveal the intrinsic mechanism of humor, to help people better understand and appreciate the American sitcom. Ten to twenty-one episodes in the third season of “The Big Bang Theory” have been selected as the corpus in this study. Through the analysis of the violation of the cooperative principle and the politeness principle of conversation, the essay finds that a great deal of humor in American sitcom is produced by violating the CP and PP and a series of rules of them. This finding contributes to a certain extent to the generation and interpretation of humor in American sitcoms, which helps Chinese audiences to better appreciate American situation comedies.

Keywords: Cooperative principle; Politeness principle; Humor; Situation comedy; Flouting

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About the author: Ming CHENG (1989-3), lecturer, master, English language teaching and translation; Zhejiang University of Water Resources and Electric Power; Xiaofang SHENG (1994-8), teaching assistant, bachelor, cross-culture translation; Zhuo Yue Language School.
1. Introduction

Humor is a common phenomenon in our daily life. It plays a very important role in intercultural communication across race, culture, sex and stratum. Linguists who specialized in rhetoric, psychology, philosophy and sociology have a profound interest in humor from ancient to modern times. In situation comedy people often make you laugh by using some specific ways. In this research, the way refers to two principles in pragmatic principles which are called Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle.

The Cooperative Principle was proposed by Hebert Paul Grice, a famous American language philosopher, in his speech at Harvard University in 1967. Then, in 1975, a book entitled *Logic and Conversation* by Hebert Paul Grice was published in America. In this book, Grice thinks that people obey the Cooperative Principle in conversation which includes four categories, and every category also contains the main rule and some sub-criteria. The four categories are the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation, the maxim of manner. Based on the concept of “face”, Leech put forward the Politeness Principle in his book called *Principles of Pragmatics* (1983). Politeness Principle is the complement of the Cooperative Principle; it has six maxims, including tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim and sympathy maxim.

In China, scholars like Liu Runqing (1987) made a comprehensive explanation and analysis of Leech’s Politeness Principle. Chen Yuan (2013) devoted a whole chapter to study and analyzing the corpus of American situation comedy. She mainly uses the violation of the Politeness Principle to analyze the humor in American situation comedy, so that people have a more profound understanding and experience of this kind of humor. Wu Beibei and Pan Wenhong (2014) analyzed the humor of “The Big Bang Theory” (six-season) from the perspective of the violation of the Cooperative Principle to help people who major in English have a better understanding of Grice’s Cooperative Principle and enhance their appreciation of English humor in situation comedies. Liu Jingjing and Li Manman (2016) found some examples, from the perspective of the violation of the Cooperative Principle, using qualitative and quantitative methods to analyze the mechanism of humor production.

In this research, the humor in American situation comedy “The Big Bang Theory” will be analyzed with the Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle. Through the explanation and analysis of some examples, it will contribute to a bet-
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2. Theoretical Overview

(1) The Definition of Humor

In Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, humor is “the quality in something that makes it funny amusement” or “the ability to understand and enjoy funny situations or to laugh at things”. According to Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Ten Edition), humor is “the quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; the mental faculty of discovering, expressing or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; something that is designed to be comical or amusing” In Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary (Six Edition), humor is “the quality that makes it funny or amusing; the ability to laugh at things that are amusing”. In the Modern Chinese Dictionary, humor is “something interesting or playful and having deep meaning or thought-provoking”.

Apart from the argument on the definition of humor, there are kinds of classification methods of humor. This essay adopts the classification made by Bergson (1917) who divides the humor into “situational humor” and “linguistic humor or verbal humor’. Situational humor is situation-oriented, such as animals mimic human behaviors. The vivid postures are situational humor. Verbal humor refers to linguistic-oriented humor which is realized linguistically. As for this research, it mainly discusses verbal humor by analyzing a famous American situation comedy named “The Big Bang Theory”.

(2) Grice’s Cooperative Principle

Grice’s Cooperative Principle makes it clear that how it is possible for the speaker to get more than what is said and for the hearer to comprehend, so it is an important contribution to the study of pragmatics. It can easily be seen that Grice’s Cooperative Principle is the guarantee of smooth conversation. And about the violation of this principle also enables us to better understand other’s words and know the sense of humor involved.

According to Grice, there are four maxims of the Cooperative Principle: Quantity Maxim, Quality Maxim, Relation Maxim and Manner Maxim, the content of the maxims are as follows:

The quantity maxim is concerned with the amount of information to be provided by a speaker. It means that if the speaker does not provide enough information, he or she may be seen uninformed. But if the speaker shares too much information, the hearer may not get the significant word. The quality maxim is con-
cerned with truthfulness. This maxim requires the speaker to say the truth and avoid illusive information. Grice observed that the speaker violates the quality maxim “when he or she deliberately lies or communicates in a way that does not reflect all honest intention” (Grice, 1975: 46). The relation maxim is very simple and it means that what the speaker said should be relevant to the topic at hand. It needs the speaker to say some related information to the conversation. The manner maxim can be recognized to the super-maxim---“be perspicuous”. The point of this maxim is that the speaker should avoid including unnecessary, redundant information in his or her conversation. If the speaker goes on without saying anything new, then the bearer will lose his or her interest in the conversation quickly and stop paying attention.

(3) Leech’s Politeness Principle

According to Leech, PP plays a higher regulative role than CP, since PP can maintain the social equilibrium as well as the harmonious relations among speakers and hearers. Therefore, he believes that “the PP can be seen not just as another principle to be added to the CP, but as a necessary complement, which rescues the CP from serious trouble.” (Leech, 1983:80)

Leech argue that there are six maxims of the Politeness Principle: Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim, and Sympathy Maxim, the content of the maxims are as follows:

The tact maxim is the most important kind of politeness. It has two parts: minimize the cost to the hearer (negative) and maximize the benefit to the hearer (positive). The generosity maxim is a sister to the tact maxim. And both of them are oriented towards costs and benefits. The approbation maxim requires participants in a conversation to maximize praises to the hearer of the talking. The modesty maxim requires the speaker to try to narrow praise and expand criticism on his own. In other words, the speaker needs to take full care of the hearer’s emotions to ensure a smooth conversation. To maintain a harmonious relationship, it is important to increase agreement and reduce disagreement with others in conversations, which is the demand of the agreement maxim. According to the agreement maxim, the participant of the conversation should minimize disagreement and maximize agreement among the communicators. Therefore, a complete agreement is the most favorable expressive way according to agreement maxim. The sympathy maxim requires speakers to maximize sympathy and minimize antipathy between the speaker and hearer, therefore these maxims can interpret why congratulation and condolences belong to polite speech acts, even though the condolences usually express views that are unfavorable to the hearer.
(4) The Relationship between Humor and CP, PP

Humor is a kind of language art, and it is also a very common phenomenon in people's daily life. On the one hand, it is inseparable from the inherent law of language itself, on the other hand, to a large extent depends on the use of language in the context. In many cases, humor is the speaker (or writer) to say the specific context of seemingly irrelevant words, deliberately stopped for fuzzy information by the listener's speculation implication. Linguistics is the study of the function and role of language units in speech, which is based on communicative participants, communicative purposes and communicative contexts. Grice's cooperative principle is one aspect of linguistic research. He believes that if one side of the communication violates one or several criteria, the communication between the two sides will be an obstacle, and the communication effect will be affected. But for the sake of necessity, people will deliberately violate the cooperative principle. When people violate the cooperative principle, they do not cooperate, but on the other hand, they embody the cooperative principle to express another meaning. That is to say, to some extent, there is an inevitable link between humor and cooperative principle. The violation of the cooperative principle is not only to produce humor, but it is often a means of producing humor in many sitcoms.

Similarly, there is a close relationship between humor and politeness principles. Leech points out that people tend to obey the politeness principle in conversation to ensure the smooth progress of the conversation. However, in reality, there are many examples of politeness principles and maxims. Politeness principle violations may result in a lot of cases, such as session interruption, embarrassing scene and so on, but in the sitcom, politeness principle humorous tends sidesplitting. An audience laughs which is used in the means of comedy.

In a word, humor, cooperative principle and politeness principle are all necessary. In the sitcom, the violation of these two principles tends to produce humor.

3 Pragmatic Analysis of Humor in The Big Bang Theory

This part was tended to analyze the chosen corpus of the sitcom “The Big Bang Theory” from the perspective of CP and PP, including their maxims

In situation comedy, humor language is one of the vital elements to attract the audience. The communication among the characters makes the conversation with humorous effects. To make clear how those effects are produced, the dialogues in the sitcom are analyzed.

The 12 episodes (ten to twenty-one) were chosen by the author randomly from
the third season of the sitcom “The Big Bang Theory”, then, the data of those episodes this process resulted in a corpus of thousands of items of humor based on the background humor, which includes more than 60% of verbal humor, the rest humorous are generated from the action, gesture, and the expression of the characters. There are hundreds of humorous items from the violation of CP and PP. The final results are shown in the following tables:

Table 4.1 Data Collection of Verbal Humor by Violation of the four maxims of CP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The four maxims of CP</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Quality</th>
<th>Relation</th>
<th>Manner</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of verbal humor of CP</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>360</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number in each episode</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 Data Collection of Verbal Humor by Violation of the six maxims of PP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The maxims of PP</th>
<th>Tact and Generosity</th>
<th>Approbation and Modest</th>
<th>Agreement and Sympathy</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Numbers of verbal humor of PP</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The average number in each episode</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 shows that quantity takes up the most frequently number violation of CP. In the following parts, the author gives some examples from the selected corpus, analyzes the violation of the maxims in detail.

(1) **Humor from the Violation of CP**

In the following paragraphs, the realization of English humor in some selected episodes by flouting the maxims of CP will be analyzed in detail.

1) Humor from the Violation of the Quantity Maxim

“One’s contribution should provide sufficiently, but not too much information” (Grice, 1975). The maxim of quantity includes two points: (a) Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of exchange. (b). Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. However, when the speaker does violate quantity maxim on purpose, he or she may bring about some humorous effect.
More information
Sometimes, more information will give us some hints, but at the same time, it is a violation of quantity maxim.
Examples as follows:

**More information**

**Example 1**
Sheldon: Our ps2  Our ps3
Our x-box  Our x-box360
Our classic Nintendo
Our super Nintendo
Our Nintendo 64 and our wii.
Leonard: We like games.
Sheldon: Right, games. They took halo 1
Halo 2, Halo 3, Call of Duty 1
Call of Duty 2, Call of Duty 3
Rock Band, Rock Band 2
Final Fantasy 1 through 9, the Legend of Zelda
The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time
The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess
Super Mario Brothers, Super Mario Galaxy
2Mario and Sonic at the Winter Olympics…
and Ms. Pacman.
Policeman: Assorted video games.  
(Episode 13, Season 3)

Sheldon lost something, but after the police came, he said too much irrelevant information, so that the police can not understand his meaning. In the end, the police even though he was a mental patient. Such a dialogue can often make the effect of laughter.

**Example 2**
Leonard: Do you want the last dumpling, Sheldon?
Sheldon: Certainly. It is not like I have to moderate my food intake, because I am planning on eating again very shortly.  
(Episode 20, Season 3)
It is enough for Sheldon to answer certainly, but he has agility conscience to have dinner with Penny later. People will laugh at his bad thoughts.

**Less information**

**Example 3**
In this episode, Sheldon was going to be mad at his research, and in the middle of the night, he woke up Leonard and Penny who were sleeping. The following
conversation took place at that time.

Leonard: What are you talking about?
Sheldon: Einstein.
Leonard: Yeah, I am going to need a little more.
Sheldon: Albert Einstein.
Leonard: Keep going.
Sheldon: When Albert Einstein came up with special relativity, he was working at the patent office.

Leonard: So, you are going to work at the patent office? (Episode 14, Season 3)

Sheldon’s answer flouts the quantity maxim because he doesn’t present adequate information for Leonard’s question. When Leonard asks what Sheldon wants to talk, Sheldon doesn’t answer in detail but gives a name, so Leonard has to ask again to know about his new plan, and then Sheldon tells the full name of Einstein, thus the humorous effect is generated because he still gives less information. The third question Leonard asks, Sheldon tells him in detail finally.

Example 4
Sheldon: November 16? Penny, which is the evening you fell in your bathtub and I had to drive you to the emergency room.
Penny: No, it isn’t.
Sheldon: Yes, it is.
Penny: No, it isn’t.
Sheldon: Penny, I have an eidetic memory. Also, that is a picture of you in the passenger seat holding your dislocated shoulder.
Penny: Mm, no, it isn’t. (Episode 16, Season 3)
Penny violates the quantity maxim by giving less information. And he also flouts the quality maxim for he doesn’t tell the truth. Penny betrays Sheldon by giving Sheldon’s name to the court. And she doesn’t admit the truth several times. The humorous effect was generated by this small scene.

2) Humor from the Violation of the Quality Maxim

As Grice mentioned, “You violate the quality maxim when you deliberately lie or communicate in a way that does not reflect an honest intension”. (Grice, 1975) This maxim requires people to tell the truth or talk with evidence.

Example 5
Burglaries occurred Sheldon and Leonard’s apartment, Howard found a DOD friend came to their apartment to build a high-tech intruder system. When he told his best friend to display this system, Penny just walked in, but the new system looks no evident effect at all. It cannot effectively prevent and seize the intruders.
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Sheldon: Wonderful security system. If we are attacked by a school of tuna.
Howard: Don’t worry the net’s going to be electrified. You picture her on the floor spamming uncontrollably.
Sheldon: Better. (Episode 13, Season 3)

The apartment will not be attacked by a school of tuna. What Sheldon said violates the maxim of quality deliberately. He means that he does not trust the system which Howard invented. And then lead to the interpretation of Howard, said the network will pass on the power later, to reduce the mistrust of Sheldon.

**Example 6**
Sheldon is the winner of this year’s Chancellor’s Award for Science. He is invited to give a speech at the banquet. But he feels scared for the reason that when he was graduated summa cum laude from college in fourteen, he fell in a faint in front of a crowd.

Sheldon: I am perfectly comfortable speaking to small groups. I cannot speak to large crowds.
Leonard: What to you is a large crowd?
Sheldon: Any group enough to trample me to death. The general rule of thumb is 36 adults or 70 children. (Episode 18, Season 3)

In this conversation, Sheldon violates the quality maxim unconsciously, he is exaggerating by saying that it is enough to kill him when he is giving speeches, and he even gives the exact number of the big crowd, the fact is that it is impossible to kill him when he gives a speech in front of a large crowd, it is only the memory of his childhood. Then, the audience burst into a laugh because the great Sheldon also has stage fright.

**Example 7**
Leonard: Hi. Hey. Look, it is Howard and his girlfriend Bernadette.
Howard: Thought I’d give the little woman a tour of the old salt mines. (Episode 10, Season 3)

Howard violates the quality maxim by using a metaphor here, he does not mean his girlfriend as salt mines, he just wants to make it a humorous way expressing his idea where he works, aiming to show that he is very charming and a humorous man. And then, people may laugh at him for his self-love.

**Example 8**
Howard’s girlfriend: That is amazing!
Sheldon: Yes. Leonard’s work is nearly and amazing as third graders growing lima beans in wet paper towels. (Episode 10, Season 3)
It is a violation of quality maxim by Sheldon when Howard’s girlfriend thinks it is amazing for Leonard’s work, Sheldon uses an ironic tone to assess Leonard’s work as simple as third graders growing lima beans in wet paper towels, and he cannot appreciate the research of Leonard and even looks down upon it.

3) Humor from the Violation of the Relation Maxim

Relation maxim requires the speaker to say something that relevant to the context, it should be to the point. If someone says something irrelevant to the topic of the talk, he violates this maxim and then the humorous effect may be produced. There are some examples in the sitcom as follows:

**Example 10**

Sheldon: Would you like a commemorative snow cone?
Leonard: I don't get how she can just announce that an old boyfriend is going to be sleeping on her touch.
Sheldon: Hey, I thought of a game we can play in the car.
Leonard: I don’t want to play a game, Sheldon.
Sheldon: It is called “Scientists”. Now, I will name three scientists, then you will put them in order of the size of their contribution to their respective fields. To make this game even more compelling, you must consider only the contribution of the man to the field, not the validity of the field itself. For example, Abu Musa Jabir ibn Hayyan made a greater contribution to the discredited field of alchemy than Halbert Vanderplatt made to neurobiology. Okay, ready to have some fun?
Leonard: An old boyfriend who is not gay. That is what a gay likes to here—“definitely”.
Sheldon: All right. I will start with an easy one: Um, Isaac Newton, Madame Curie, and Niels Bohr. And then I say little thing and I end up being the bad guy! Hint: Madame Curie had her husband to help her.
Leonard: What I am supposed to say? “Sure, Penny, I am cool with your old boyfriend sleeping in your apartment.” “Well, Leonard, it doesn’t matter if you are cool or not” “because I am Penny and I am pretty and I can do whatever the hell I want!” “Oh! I get it! You think you are doing me a favor just by being in a relationship with me!”
Sheldon: Leonard! Stop the car!

This is a typical scene in the situation comedy that flouts the maxim of relation. What Sheldon and Leonard talking about absolutely no relation. Sheldon tries to make Leonard focus on his new game, but Leonard continues complaining about Penny, Sheldon couldn’t stand it and then stopped the conversation at last. This small scene will also make people laugh through such a dialogue without logic.
Example 11
Sheldon: Professor, can you identify our ticket?
Professor: Of course I can. I can identify every insect and arachnid on the planet. Not that that’s going to keep me from having to move in with my daughter in Oxnard. And we are not talking Oxnard at the beach. No! We are talking Oxnard in the Onion fields.
Sheldon: Well, could you look at toby?
Professor: Toby? What a stupid name for a ticket.
Sheldon: Told ya.
Professor: It is a field ticket.
Sheldon: Yes! - No, no, wait!
Sheldon: Dr. Crawley, are you sure?
Professor: Young man, I have been studying insects since I was eight years old. Do you know what they used to call me in school? Creepy Crawley.
Sheldon: Cruel as that may be. But this is not in itself a credential.
Professor: Let me show you something. See that? That is a Crawley’s dung battle. I discovered it after spending six months slogging. Through a Bornean rain forest, while my wife was back home shacking up with a two-bit ornithologist who lives on a sailboat and likes to wear boot-cut jeans! So, when I tell you that it is a common field ticket, you can take that to the damn bank! Cause God knows I cannot! That tramp took me for everything!

What the professor said is a violation of the maxim of relation. When Sheldon asks if the professor could identify the ticket Toby for them, professor can make clear whether it is a field ticket, but he said something irrelevant but things about the privacy about his wife, and his complaint about her. When Sheldon is wondering the truth, the professor flouts the relation maxim again by saying what others called him and the terrible experience in the rain forest which is also irrelevant to the question. And then the humorous effects are produced.

4) Humor from the Violation of the Manner Maxim
The manner maxim is that people should obey the way they talk. To talk effectively, speakers should avoid misleading elements and communicate with logic. If people flout this maxim, humorous effects are produced then. The following are the examples:

Example 12
Sheldon wakes Leonard up at midnight and tells him the truth that he had dinner with Penny. So he cannot achieve good sleeping at all. The following is their dialogue:
Sheldon: Howard made it very clear that my allegiance should be to male comrades before women who sell their bodies for money.
Leonard: It is possible he said “Bros before where?”
Sheldon: Yes, but I rephrased it to avoid offending the whore.

In this episode, Sheldon violates the maxim of manner purposely, what he says prefers to explain later that he rephrased the word to avoid offending the whore. It seems very redundant to express it in such a way. The effect is the laugh from all of the audience.

**Example 13**

Leonard is invited to Switzerland to attend a conference and see the CERN supercollider on February 14. What he wants to do is to have a romantic Valentine’s Day with Penny there, but he has a deal with Sheldon who is eager to go to the conference.

Penny: Oh, my god! Leonard!
Sheldon: That is incredible! Not so fast. You might want to hold off on lighting your rabeliechtl, Penny.
Penny: Rabe-what-ly?
Sheldon: Rabeliechtl. It means turnip light and refers to a traditional lantern hand-carved from a root vegetable and used to celebrate a certain Swiss festival that you will not be celebrating. (Episode 18, Season 3)

In this scene, Sheldon violates the manner maxim that makes Penny confused. The humorous effect has been produced although Sheldon explains it later.

**Example 14**

The four geniuses have dinner together in the same restaurant as usual. The following is the dialogue between them:

Sheldon: Oh, dear lord, they redid the menu.
Leonard: So what? It is the same food.
Sheldon: Oh, is it? Look at this. General tso’s chicken is no longer listed under “Specialties”. It is now under “Chicken.”
Raj: So?
Sheldon: Yes, general tso.
Raj: Not “Tso” The chicken “So” The question. So? (Episode 13, Season 3)

In this episode, we can learn that so and the tso is the homophone which has different meanings, Raj does not say the words deliberately to flout the maxim of manner. But for Sheldon thinks that Raj has the same feeling with him. Raj is asking what is wrong with general tso. And then the humorous effect was generated.
(2) Humor from the Violation of PP

People usually save one’s face by obeying the Politeness Principle, sometimes; the humor emerges based on violating PP purposely. Conversations in the situation comedy usually break out these principles to create a humorous effect. And in my mind, it is an important tool to make people laugh. Now let us enjoy humor generated by the violations of PP.

1) Humor from the Violation of the Maxim of Tact and Generosity

People will flout the maxim of tact and generosity sometimes, maximizing the cost and benefit of ourself can make humorous effect usually. The following are the examples:

Example 15

After a three-month Arctic expedition, Sheldon takes for granted that he’d made a remarkable stride in science by confirming the string theory of the universe, and sends an e-mail to everyone at the college to inform his groundbreaking success, however, all his findings turns to be a grand deception by his three mates who’d fed him the with doctored wrong data. The following is the conversation between them:

Sheldon: People have been pointing and laugh at me all morning.
Opponent: That is not true. People have been pointing and laugh at you your whole life. (Laughter)
Sheldon: All right, I have had enough. Attention, everyone. I am Dr. Sheldon Cooper. As many of you in the physics department might know, my career has taken a minor detour.
Opponent: Off a cliff. (Laughter)
Sheldon: My credibility may have been damaged.
Opponent: Completely wrecked. (Laughter)
Sheldon: But I would like to remind you that in science, there is no such thing as failure. There once a man who was referred to his prediction of a cosmological constant as the single biggest blunder of his career. That man’s name was surprising, surprise—Albert Einstein.
Opponent: Yeah, but research into Dark Energy proved that Einstein’s cosmological constant was right all along. So you still—surprise, surprise—a loser. (Laughter)  
(Episode 16, Season 3)

In this episode, Sheldon wants to say something to defend himself. He accepts to receive a considerable understanding of warm encouragement from others, however, his explanation is hit back by his mean opponent who throws away the tact maxim of minimizing the cost to other and maximizing benefit to others in po-
lite communication. The constant violation of these maxims destroys Sheldon completely and makes the laughter overflow.

**Example 16**

Both Penny and Sheldon are ill with the flu. Warm-hearted and fragile Penny prepared a bowl of soup for Sheldon.

Penny: Here is your soup.
Sheldon: Chicken?
Penny: Yes.
Sheldon: With the little stars.
Penny: Yes.
Sheldon: Heated to 180 degrees.
Penny: Why don’t I pour you in your lap and you can tell me. (Laughter)

(Episode 15, Season 3)

Penny cannot bear Sheldon’s chatter and tries to stop by saying that she would pour hot soup on Sheldon’s lap. Actually; she doesn’t mean so, but a joke. In this scene, she violates the quality maxim of CP and the tact maxim of PP, and then, the humorous effect was generated.

2) Humor from the Violation of the Maxim of Approbation and Modest

People will violate the maxim of approbation and modest sometimes, maximizing the dispraise of others and praise of oneself, which produces humorous effects. The following are the examples:

**Example 17**

Sheldon: Really? I would point out that I am at the top of my profession, while you preside over the kiddy table of yours.
Honor: Dr. Cooper, before I find you in contempt and throw you in jail, I'm going to give you a chance to apologize for that last remark.

The maxim of approbation and modest requires us to try to praise as much as possible and debase ourselves as much as possible. In this scene, Sheldon says that he is at the top of his profession which violates the maxim. It makes people feel he is a narcissistic person. And then the humorous effect was generated.

**Example 18**

Sheldon turns his neck when video chatting with Amy.

Amy: Is there something wrong with your neck?
Sheldon: It is a little stiff. What a remarkably fragile structure such a valuable payload. (Laughter)

In this scene, Sheldon uses a metaphor to overblown his wisdom head as “a
valuable payload”. Regarding himself as a great scientific giant, his self-praise makes the laughter again.

3) Humor from the Violation of the Maxim of Agreement and Sympathy

The maxim of agreement and sympathy are often used in assertive, people will minimize the agreement and maximize the disagreement between self and others to flout the maxim of agreement, and they also flout the maxim of sympathy and maximize the sympathy between self and others. And all of these violations can bring humorous effects to the audience sometimes. The following are the examples:

**Example 19**

- Sheldon: Hold.
- Raj: What?
- Sheldon: Explain your sneeze.
- Raj: I'm sorry?
- Sheldon: Do you have allergies?
- Raj: No.
- Sheldon: Is there too much pepper on your salad?
- Raj: I don't put pepper on salads.
- Sheldon: I've heard enough. Sit over there.
- Raj: Oh, come on.
I don't want to sit by myself.
- Sheldon: That's what Typhoid Mary said,
- Raj: Guys, help me.
- Howard: Sheldon, come on.
- Leonard: Yeah, it's just one sneeze.

You're on your own.  

(Remark: Episode 21, Season 3)

Raj sneezed so that Sheldon did not want to seat with him, then Raj wanted to explain that why he sneezed to arouse other’s agreement and sympathy, but he failed at last. In this scene, Sheldon violates the maxims of agreement and sympathy, and then the humorous effect was generated.

**Example 20**

- Leonard: Okay, great.
But you like it, and you're my friend.
- Sheldon: Drat. No Frodo for you.
- Sheldon: Hello.
- Penny: Hello.
- Sheldon: I do. It fails as drama/science fiction, and it's hopelessly derivative.
Still not taking you to Switzerland.

-Sheldon: Drat. No Frodo for you. (Episode 15, Season 3)

Sheldon wants to do something to apologize to Leonard, but he failed finally. At the beginning of their conversation, Sheldon suggests watching a movie with Leonard though he doesn’t like the movie at all. But he thinks that they are friends so he can bear it. Of course, he has another reason—going to Switzerland. However, Leonard violates the agreement maxim first, and then they seem to be in a row. Childish words between them attracted the laughter of the audience.

4. Conclusion

Humor, as a complicated subject has been studied for many years. As I have mentioned, scholars from different disciplines have made a great contribution to the study of humor. The research of humor opens up from the perspective of linguistics before. Nowadays, scholars study humor from theories of pragmatics like CP and PP.

This essay tries to analyze verbal humor from the violation of CP and PP (including their maxims) in the American situation comedy called “The Big Bang Theory”. After the analysis of examples, the author finds that the violation of these two principles has generated a large number of humorous effects.

Under the framework of the essay the CP and PP and their related maxims and a detailed statistics are made of the third season of the famous American situation comedy “The Big Bang Theory”, the 10 to 21 episodes’ quantitative analysis is used to collect the corpus, after the analysis of the author, a statistics show that nearly more than 60% humorous language is generated from the violation of these two principles. It proves that there is a close relationship between cooperative principle and humor in situation comedies. In the essay, the author gives a detailed analysis of four maxims of the Cooperative Principle and six maxims of the Politeness Principle. The author finds that among all the violations of maxims, the violation of the quantity of maxim of CP is the most effective violation to make humorous effects. Furthermore, the characters in the situation comedy may violate more than one maxim in the meantime sometimes. The selected examples can prove that the characters in the sitcom convey their implied meanings to others or violate the maxims unconsciously or purposely to make fun of others in a dialogue.

However, as the limitation of the time and energy, this essay may have developed its analysis in a shallow degree. This essay studied the humor of sitcom from the perspective of pragmatics theories (CP and PP).
Works Cited


