

An Analysis of Verbal Humor from the Perspective of Impoliteness Principle

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Abstract: Based on Culpeper's Impoliteness Principle, this paper analyzes verbal humor in *Two Broke Girls* through quantitative and qualitative analysis. It is found that speakers can use different impoliteness strategies to construct or alienate interpersonal relationships and different genders have different trends in choosing impoliteness strategies that can produce humorous effect.

Keywords: Impoliteness Principle; Impoliteness strategies; Verbal humor

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1. Introduction

Verbal humor is an ingenious way of speech that uses implicit expressions to guide people to comprehend the meaning of utterance. Although the research on humor was originally based on aesthetics, verbal humor, as a common linguistic phenomenon in life, has attracted many scholars' attention. The researches abroad on verbal humor mainly focus on the fields of semantics, pragmatics, cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics and computational linguistics. The domestic researches are mainly conducted from the perspectives of rhetoric, linguistic logic, cognitive linguistics, pragmatics and systemic functional linguistics. Though great achievements have been made, there are few researches that explore the relationship between verbal humor and Impoliteness Principle, which plays a significant role in verbal communication. This paper selects *Two Broke Girls* as the source of corpus, attempts to analyze verbal humor based on the use of impoliteness strategies with the intention to make a new exploration and to analyze the appropriate use of impoliteness strategies to produce humorous effect in verbal communication.

2. Impoliteness Principle

Impoliteness, first regarded as a behavior of rudeness, is ignored by linguistic researchers. With the deepening of researches, some scholars believed that it should be treated as a common language phenomenon and found it difficult to explain by Politeness Principle. Inspired by Brown & Levinson, Culpeper (1996) established Impoliteness Model. In 2005, he improved the model by replacing Sarcasm or mock impoliteness with Off-record impoliteness, which included 5 impoliteness strategies: Bold-on-record impoliteness, Positive impoliteness, Negative impoliteness, Withhold politeness and Off-record impoliteness, each of them containing one or several output strategies.

3. Corpus Analysis of Verbal Humor in *Two Broke Girls* from the Perspective of Impoliteness Principle

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

This paper selects the sixth season of *Two Broke Girls* as the data source. By filtering the impolite discourse that produce humorous effect in the corpus and analyzing the impoliteness strategies used by the characters, a total of 422 output strategies from about 335 talk turns are selected as the data.

By sorting out the data, Positive impoliteness and Off-record impoliteness are most frequently-used strategies, which account for 32.94% and 34.83% respectively, while Withhold politeness is least-used, accounting for only 0.95%. For output strategies, "Satire or mock", "Call the other names" and "Criticize" are used most frequently, appearing 147 times, 54 times and 42 times.

Satire or mock accounts for more than one-third of the total and it is used brilliantly by the characters in this play with the function of criticizing the other party's shortcomings or mistakes sideways. Its characteristic is to use euphemistic language rather than fierce words to accuse or warn others, which is easier to be accepted than blunt remonstrance and direct criticism, so is favored by people because it can help people handle interpersonal relationships.

"Call the other names" is frequently used because nickname can be recreated and the context in which it is used is almost unlimited. In this sitcom, multiple characters usually discuss some topics together. They often joke with each other by calling the other names, but there is no real hostile relationship with each other.

It can also be seen that people tend to use "Criticize", a method that can directly and frankly point out other people's mistakes or criticize other people's speech behavior while have a weaker effect on others' face damage.

3.2 Qualitative Analysis

The research selects some representative examples, qualitatively analyzes the use of five impoliteness strategies in verbal humor and points out the impoliteness strategies used by the characters according to specific context and explains why this strategy can produce humor. For example:

Caroline: Hi. My name is Caroline Channing, and I will be singing “Hamilton” from the musical of the same name.

Bonnie: Hold off on that. I’m not quite ready to kill myself.

--from Season 6, Episode 13

The output strategy “Satire or mock” was adopted in this example. When Caroline prepared to sing a song, Bonnie directly prevented her from singing by saying that “I’m not quite ready to kill myself.” This kind of impoliteness strategy that indirectly threatens the other’s face is more effective and can produce a humorous effect.

4. The Options of Impoliteness Strategies in Verbal Humor

4.1 The Application of Impoliteness Strategies in Handling Interpersonal Relationships

Language, as a communication tool, plays a very important role in interpersonal relationship construction. There must be a certain connection between impoliteness and interpersonal relationships. The pursuit of harmony in interpersonal relationships is a manifestation of human rationality. For this reason, it has become normal for the communicative subject to take measures to avoid or eliminate conflicts to construct interpersonal relationships.

In daily life, sometimes it is common to use some language strategies to deconstruct unnecessary interpersonal relationships. For example, in order to draw a clear line between the speaker and the other party, or the speaker wants to express dislike of the other party and no longer interact with each other, language strategies may be used and if they are used skillfully, humorous effect may be produced, which not only entertain the surrounding people but also handle interpersonal relationships skillfully.

4.2 The Use of Impoliteness Strategies Based on Different Genders

In a complex social culture, gender language stereotypes have gradually become a sign of gender. Language often reflects people’s social expectations for decent behaviors of men and women, or the society believes that a certain language model is more suitable for a certain gender group. This confirms the existence of social regulations on verbal communication in gender language, as well as the types of verbal communication strategies that men and women will generally adopt in a specific context.

By summarizing the data on the impoliteness strategies used by the characters in *Two Broke Girls*, the differences were found between men and women in the use of impoliteness strategies. In this sitcom, men often use output strategies of “Threaten” and “Use taboo words”, while women often use “Call the others name”, “Criticize” and “Satire or mock”. This result is consistent with the characteristics of male and female communication and the requirements of the society on the words and behaviors of men and women. The fundamental reason for the differences between men and women in their communication styles is the gradual formation of gender culture under the traditional mainstream culture. For example, how the language vocabulary is structured depends on whether the speaker is a male or a female, which means that males and females have different sets of vocabulary. In people’s impression, women should be gentle and sensible with appropriate words and deeds. Compared with the traditional image of thin and petite females, the mighty and strong males are more compatible with the verbal behavior of threats and intimidation.

5. Conclusion

This paper studies verbal humor from a new perspective, Impoliteness Principle, proposed by Culpeper and selects 422 example sentences with humorous effect in 22 episodes of the sixth season of *Two Broke Girls* as data source. The research finds that Off-record impoliteness is the most frequently used impoliteness strategy. Its indirect features are more acceptable. Then, through a qualitative analysis of the use of five impoliteness strategies, this paper finds that people can choose impoliteness strategies in specific context if they want to achieve a certain humorous effect and the pragmatic functions of different impoliteness strategies in different interpersonal relationships can achieve the effect of either constructing or alienating interpersonal relationships. In addition, this paper discovered that different genders tend to adopt different impoliteness strategies. Men tend to choose the output strategies “Threaten” and “Use taboo words”, while women tend to choose strategies “Call the other names”, “Satire or mock” and “Criticize”. Through the analysis of examples, it reveals the important role of various impoliteness strategies in shaping the image of speakers as well as expressing their attitude and shows that impoliteness strategies can also construct atmosphere and produce humor in some specific situations and contexts.

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