

An Analysis of Cantonese Verbal Humor in *Table for Six* from the Perspective of Pragmatics

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Abstract:

Table for Six is a Hong Kong comedy movie released in 2022. With a box office of 77 million Hong Kong dollars, it won the historical championship of Hong Kong comedy films and was well-received by the public upon its release. It is a superb example of a “Dayo Wong-style movie”, with a ton of amazing Cantonese verbal humor. The cooperation principle, a crucial pragmatics theory, is used in this study along with qualitative research methodologies to investigate the mechanism of verbal humor production in the Cantonese setting. The article strategically selects four very representative character dialogues in the movie and conducts an in-depth analysis of them using the cooperative principle’s quantity maxim, quality maxim, relation maxim and manner maxim, further broadening the scope of linguistics research in the Cantonese context.

Keywords: verbal humor; Cantonese; Cooperative Principle; *Table for Six*; pragmatics analysis.

1. Introduction

1.1 Humor

1.1.1 Theories of Humor

Humor plays an important role in people’s daily life and is also one of the unique language abilities of human beings. For a long time, many scholars have conducted in-depth research on the topic of humor from different angles. The contemporary research on humor is divided into three major systems. The first is Superiority Theory, also known as Disparagement Theory and Aggression Theory. It mainly emphasizes that the person who laughs is in an advantageous position, while the person who is laughed at is in a disadvantaged position [1]. Laughing at other people’s misfortunes or at things they despise is how one displays their superiority [2]. This approach emphasizes the social psychological function of humor, which is to fortify self-identity by drawing attention to contrasts. In reality, a person confirms and reinforces his own normalcy when he laughs at the misfortune of others [3]. Superiority, however, is a relative concept. People make fun of each other, which establishes humor as a crucial tool for modifying interpersonal social interactions. Therefore, the superiority theory bears distinct sociological implications [4]. Followed by Relief Theory, also known as Release Theory. It is closely related to psychology and psychoanalysis. The main point is that laughter caused by humor can release

the tension and depression caused by social constraints [1]. If the released objects are expanded to the rules of language use, it will also be beneficial to some humor linguistics research [4]. Sigmund Freud is an important representative of this theory. He elaborated his views in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. But in fact, his theory does not focus on what humor is, nor does it explain well why we find humor funny [2]. It thus has some restrictions. Incongruity Theory is the last theory, and it has the closest relationship to humor linguistics. It investigates the underlying mechanisms by which humor elicits laughter. On this matter, academics like Beattie, Schopenhauer, and Kant shared their opinions. By combining their points of view, we can see that the fundamental tenet of incongruity theory is to perceive inconsistencies behind the surface of unity and harmony before discovering absurdity, which gives rise to humor [4].

1.1.2 Classification of Humor

As early as the ancient Roman period, Cicero pioneered the classification of humor into verbal humor and referral humor from a linguistic perspective. Humor can be categorized in a variety of ways. For instance, humor can be categorized into categories such as sexual humor, racial humor, political humor, and so on based on the expression content. Humor can be classified into two categories based on how it is expressed: verbal humor and non-verbal humor. Riddles, conundrums, and wisecracks, for instance, all fall under the first group. You can categorize

non-verbal humor into categories such as action humor, graphic humor, musical humor, and more [4]. Since the verbal humor in *Table for Six*, an excellent comedy movie, is outstanding and given the limited length of this article, this article focuses on the verbal humor.

1.2 Cooperative Principle

Pragmatics is an important branch of linguistics. George Yule once succinctly explained the research scope of pragmatics. “It is the study of speaker meaning [5].” It

has developed rapidly since the last century, among which Grice from the United States is an important scholar. He proposed the cooperative principle in a series of lectures he gave to Harvard University in 1967. Grice pointed out that when people participate in a conversation, in order for the conversation to proceed effectively, both parties will abide by the cooperative principle. Grice followed the philosopher Kant and proposed the four maxims of the cooperative principle, as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Meaning of Cooperative Principle [6]

MAXIMS	DEFINITION	SUB-MAXIMS
Quantity	Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purpose of the exchange.	What is said should satisfy the amount of information required for communication
		What is said should not exceed the amount of information required for communication
Quality	Try to make your contribution one that is true.	Do not say what you know to be false
		Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence
Relation	The information provided in a communication should be relevant or related to the topic. It requires that two parties should not provide irrelevant answers in conversation.	N.A.
Manner	Be perspicuous	Avoid obscurity of expression
		Avoid ambiguity
		Be brief(avoid unnecessary prolixity)

However, people often violate these maxims for reasons such as politeness, avoiding embarrassment, creating humor, achieving rhetorical effects, cultural differences, politics, and diplomacy [7]. FU Hui offered a very fitting metaphor: the cooperative principle is like a middle-aged academic who walks primly and dresses professionally, but verbal humor is like a street kid who chats freely and dressed in casual clothes. When comparing the two, the former is more serene and conventionally beautiful, while the latter is a powerful representation of a newly formed community. Employing verbal humor means violating the cooperative principle to a certain extent [8].

1.3 Table for Six

Released in 2022, *Table for Six* is a Hong Kong family comedy directed by Sunny Chan, starring Dayo Wong, Stephy Tang, Louis Cheung, Ivana Wong, Lin Min-Chen, and Peter Chan. Upon its release, the film captivated a wide audience and garnered numerous awards and nominations. Most notably, it achieved a remarkable box office record of 77 million Hong Kong dollars, securing its place as the highest-grossing Hong Kong comedy film of all

time. This substantial achievement is a testament to its resounding success as a comedic endeavor.

It tells the story of a family of three brothers and their girlfriends. This is the origin of the “six” in the title. The eldest brother CHAN Hung’s ex-girlfriend Monica, who he never forgot, turned out to be the second brother’s current girlfriend, and they even lived together with CHAN Hung. For the sake of face, CHAN Hung fell in love with Ah Meow, whom he had only known for a few days. With Josephine, with whom CHAN Hei, the third brother, had never married but had been in love for a long time, there was an emotional breakdown. The focal point and high point of this movie is the “table” mentioned in the title. The four sequences in which everyone is gathered around the table for a dinner include most of the film’s problems. While some scenes show family members fighting and arguing angrily, others show them getting along well. The issues were settled at the end of the story when the family members gathered around the table that had seen their love, hatred, affection, and contempt. A meal has the power to end all disputes, yet the table can exacerbate them. This is still home, even though everything is going wild

[9].

As the pioneer of stand-up comedy in Hong Kong, Dayo Wong is also a major feature of the film. He was the first to introduce stand-up comedy to Hong Kong and carried out localization transformation. He translated stand-up comedy into Cantonese “*Dung3 Duk1 Siu3*”. In Cantonese it means a person standing and telling jokes. Not only that, he used a lot of humorous expressions to talk about Hong Kong’s social issues in his performance, conveying unique insights with a very personal style, which aroused widespread attention and popularity. His performances are always sold out and he has become a well-known comedy master in Hong Kong. Later on, he made a name for himself in the film industry as a humorous actor. We will also use the name of a major actor to designate a kind of film when the actor’s personal performance possesses a strong sense of style identity and is able to propel the dramatic rhythm and atmosphere of the entire picture. *Table for Six* is a typical “Dayo Wong-style movie” in this regard [10]. Judging from its box office performance, it is no exaggeration to say that *Table for Six* is the most outstanding representative of “Dayo Wong-style movie”.

1.4 Research Background

Based on the research findings of the cooperative principle, numerous scholars have utilized this principle to analyze dialogues in classic literature, sitcoms, comics, films, and everyday conversations. The primary study objects are centered around Mandarin and English, while research on talks in Vietnamese, Spanish, and Arabic is also occasionally visible. There is a significant study gap because, unfortunately, there is essentially no research on Cantonese communication from the standpoint of the cooperation principle. There are 84.9 million native speakers of Cantonese in the world. In addition to Guangdong, Guangxi, Hong Kong, Macao and other places, it also has extensive influence overseas. In most Chinatowns and Chinese communities, Cantonese is an important language for communication. It is a shame that such an important language has gone unstudied for so long. This article will analyze Cantonese conversation through the cooperative principle and explore Cantonese verbal humor through the perspective of pragmatics to fill the gap in linguistic research.

Based on the research of *Table for Six*, most scholars analyze the themes, narrative techniques, and so on of the film from the perspective of drama and film studies. Among them, the research of ZHOU Dayi has a certain relevance to the research direction of this paper. He used the two keywords “Relic” and “Icon” proposed by Italian film scholar Francesco Casetti to analyze the three characteristics of this film. There is a mention of stand-up comedy. He argues that the humor of stand-up comedy has a “static” characteristic, while the art of film has a “dynamic”

characteristic. There is actually a certain contradiction between the two. He analyzed how *Table for Six* achieves a subtle balance between the two. At the same time, he particularly emphasized the language logic of stand-up comedy and the Cantonese context and analyzed it with examples [10]. This makes it easier for readers to comprehend the film’s humor. But he spoke in generalities and did not use the idea of pragmatics to do in-depth investigation. On the other hand, stand-up comedians typically talk unilaterally while they perform. Additionally, this makes it challenging for academics to directly examine stand-up comedy using the cooperative principle. Furthermore, Dayo Wong and the other actors didn’t actually perform stand-up comedy in the film. Because they must converse with other characters in the film. It is obvious that stand-up comedy’s funny style has inspired their dialogue. In order to close the gap in the linguistics, more study into the characters’ precise language in the movie is crucial.

1.5 Objective

To sum up, Cantonese, as a language with a large number of speakers and wide influence, has been lacking research on the pragmatics of cooperative principle. Audiences in Hong Kong and even around the Cantonese area have passionately embraced Dayo Wong’s verbal humor, as he was the pioneer in introducing and localizing stand-up comedy to the city. It can be argued that his verbal humor is quite significant, reflecting or representing Cantonese verbal humor to some level. *Table for Six*, the box office darling of Hong Kong comedy films, possesses a deft sense of humor, which is evident in its use of speech as well as in the inventive character development and excellent performances. *Table for Six* is undoubtedly an outstanding representative of “Dayo Wong-style movie”. There are a lot of humorous dialogues in the movie. As far as reality is concerned, the dialogues between the characters in the movie have the characteristics of high frequency and violating multiple Gricean maxims at the same time. Based on it, The study is based on a qualitative descriptive method as it aims at exploring the violations of Gricean cooperative principle in four conversations with highly representative characters of *Table for Six* and describing how such violations create Cantonese verbal humor.

2. Analysis of Violating Cooperative Principle in Case of Table for Six

Example 1

Josephine: Give me the password!

CHAN Hei: Do you want the new one or the old one?

Josephine: Why would I want the old one?

CHAN Hei: As a memento, perhaps?

Josephine: Hehe... You have done something wrong!

CHAN Hei: To be fair, there are a million possibilities.

Josephine: Like what?

CHAN Hei: For example... Maybe I am proposing. I typed the proposal down and I do not want you to know.

Josephine: Really?

CHAN Hei: No. Just an example.

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Josephine: You won't tell me? I will guess it.

CHAN Hei: What's the point?

CHAN Hei: I changed it back to your birthday.

Josephine: It doesn't work!

CHAN Hei: October 5th, right?

Josephine: It is October 25th, asshole!

CHAN Hei: You changed your birthday?

This is the first dialogue that appears in *Table for Six*. Josephine was CHAN Hei's girlfriend. Josephine wanted to ask him for the password to check his phone. Rather than answering her directly, he shifted the conversation to a debate about the age of the requested password by asking if she wanted the old or new one. Given the larger context of Josephine's remarks, it is actually clear that her desire was for the current password. CHAN Hei purposefully shifted the subject because he was afraid to offer Josephine his phone due to his guilty conscience. CHEN Jing-jing categorized the violating relation maxim even though Grice had not set sub-maxims for the relation maxim in the cooperative principle. This makes it easier for people to determine if someone is in violation of the relation maxim. She mentioned that giving irrelevant information and changing topics are two ways to violate the relation maxim [11]. Therefore, CHAN Hei's answer belongs to changing topics and violates the relation maxim. This also allowed the film to set a relaxed and humorous tone at the beginning. The audience is immediately attracted by the opening joke and becomes more interested in the film.

Then, CHAN Hei violated the quality maxims three times during the conversation with Josephine. Josephine continued to ask CHAN Hei what the use of his old password was. In fact, her words are implying that CHAN Hei's old password is useless and asking him to give a new password. CHAN Hei knew what Josephine meant, but he didn't want Josephine to know the secrets in the phone, so he said that Josephine might want to keep the old password as a souvenir. But obviously, both Josephine and CHAN Hei knew that it was completely impossible for her to use an old password as a souvenir. Therefore, CHAN Hei's answer violated the quality maxim's first sub-maxims. Josephine continued to point out CHAN Hei's guilty conscience, and CHAN Hei argued that it might be because there was a proposal plan on the phone and he wanted to surprise Josephine and didn't want her to know. But we also learned from subsequent conversations that this was not the case. CHAN Hei had not prepared

a proposal plan for Josephine at all. This argument was just to delay and discourage Josephine from checking his phone. CHAN Hei's answer once again violated the quality maxim. Immediately afterwards, CHAN Hei confessed to Josephine that the password was her birthday. After Josephine tried it, she found that she could not unlock the phone. CHAN Hei said that Josephine's birthday is October 5th. However, October 25th is actually Josephine's birthday. Thus, CHAN Hei inquired as to Josephine's birthday alteration. As everyone knows, a person's birthday is set at birth and cannot be altered later. Of course, changing your birthday is hardly common sense. CHAN Hei said this in an attempt to hide his embarrassment at his error. Here, he gave the crowd a ton of jokes while breaking the quality maxim for the third time.

Example 2

CHAN Hung: Five bags... That's nearly HK\$800 per bag!

Bernard: It doesn't matter. It's on me anyway.

CHAN Hung: It seems that there is really a conspiracy this time. When you ordered that HK\$1000 takeout the other time, something really did happen.

Bernard: What was it?

CHAN Hung: You screwed my wife.

Bernard: What?

CHAN Hung: You took that junk trip with those girls and dropped my camera into the sea. You literally sank 30 grand! What is it this time?

Bernard: We're brother...(Interrupted by CHAN Hung)

CHAN Hung: Whoa! When CHOW Yun Fat said that in *A Better Tomorrow*, he got shot in the head. Watch it!

As CHAN Hung's younger brother, Bernard was going to introduce something to CHAN Hung that would shock him, that was, Bernard had been already in a relationship with CHAN Hung's ex-girlfriend Monica. So Bernard treated family members including CHAN Hung to a take-away worth about HKD\$4,000. Normally, Bernard rarely treated everyone to such an expensive meal, which immediately aroused CHAN Hung's vigilance. In addition, Bernard had been emphasizing that he had to announce something to CHAN Hung before this, and let him be mentally prepared. CHAN Hung naturally thought of the last time Bernard invited him to dinner. Bernard didn't remember what it was for a moment, so he asked CHAN Hung. In response, CHAN Hung stated that Bernard had screwed his "wife" the last time he had invited him to supper. Bernard smashed his camera the last time he went out with other girls, CHAN Hung later said. Therefore, we are aware that the initial "wife" was merely a metaphor for CHAN Hung's camera. CHAN Hung referred to his camera as his "wife" because he loved it so much. However, we would naturally consider a wife to be a person's spouse in a typical situation. CHAN Hung chose to use

a word that was likely to cause ambiguity to express his meaning at the beginning, instead of directly saying “You broke my camera last time.” This sentence is obscure and ambiguous, which obviously violates the manner maxim in the cooperative principle. What makes this expression even more humorous is that originally this was just a joke by CHAN Hung. Unexpectedly, Bernard was really with CHAN Hung’s ex-girlfriend. CHAN Hung made a joke about something that was bad for him and almost impossible to happen, but he didn’t expect it to come true afterwards. This unexpected ending created humor and made the audience laugh.

Then CHAN Hung continued to ask Bernard what bad things happened this time. Bernard changed the topic and said that they were brothers, trying to avoid or alleviate CHAN Hung’s blame for his trouble by emphasizing the close relationship between them. Bernard changed the focus from discussing what trouble he got into to discussing his relationship with CHAN Hung. He did not directly answer CHAN Hung’s question. In other words, his answer was not relevant to the question and changed the subject, violating the relation maxim. Evidently, CHAN Hung was dissatisfied with Bernard’s response and more worried about the trouble Bernard had caused. His next statement, however, did not directly challenge Bernard; rather, it mentioned that a character in the film *A Better Tomorrow* had made a similar statement and had been shot to death right after. Bernard was advised to keep his distance by CHAN Hung, who referenced this case. This violated the relation maxim as well.

Example 3

Monica: Um... Have you been in love in the past few years?

CHAN Hung: No... Not fixed. I have too many choices. You know I usually flirt for a year or two before getting into a relationship with someone.

CHAN Hung: But there is a girl I am almost done flirting with. When the time is right, I’ll introduce her to you.

Monica: Sure!

After Bernard announced his relationship with Monica, he bought himself and Monica a new bed. But when the new bed was delivered to his home, he happened to be away. After CHAN Hung helped collect the bed, he discovered that the bed was not installed. So he installed it himself. At this time, Monica also came into the room to chat with CHAN Hung and asked him about his recent relationship status. CHAN Hung’s answer was negative, but combining with his later response, we know that what he actually negated was not that he was not in love, but that he did not have a regular partner. DU Shuyu pointed out that when the amount of information is too small, the speaker fails to provide sufficient information, which will

result in the listener not being able to fully understand the intention, resulting in information asymmetry. In the construction of humor, this lack of information is often used to create misunderstandings [3]. Monica was unable to fully comprehend CHAN Hung’s objective since his initial response lacked sufficient details to identify the subject of his denial. This led to amusing misunderstandings and violated the cooperative principle’s quantity maxim. To save himself from humiliation, CHAN Hung did not want Monica to know that he was still in love with her. He again violated the quality maxim when he mentioned he had a lot of girls he could choose as his girlfriend. Because Josephine had previously disclosed that CHAN Hung had only had one girlfriend during the preceding ten years in a discussion. CHAN Hung twice violated the quality maxims in the conversation that followed. CHAN Hung said that he usually flirts with someone for a long time before starting a relationship, and he had a girl he almost had finished flirting with and planned to introduce her to his family. The girl mentioned by CHAN Hung is Ah Meow. According to the previous plot, they actually only met once, and it was CHAN Hung who asked Ah Meow to take photos, and they didn’t have much communication. CHAN Hung knew that Ah Meow had had a crush on him, but they had not been flirting with each other. Later, in order to cover up the lie, CHAN Hung hurriedly got together with Ah Meow, whom he had only known for a few days. CHAN Hung lied to Monica many times in order to avoid embarrassment, which added to the entertainment of the conversation and produced a humorous effect.

Example 4

Ah Meow: What about his ex? Monica?

CHAN Hei: Um... They met at work. They are like a promiscuous woman who met a playboy and they were in a relationship for several years (In the initial Cantonese dialogue, a Cantonese slang term was used, and the pronunciation of this slang in Cantonese is “*haau4 po4 jyu6 zoek6 zi1 fan2 haak3*”).

Ah Meow: What?

CHAN Hei: It is a happy marriage for a century (In the initial Cantonese dialogue, a Chinese idiom was used, and the pronunciation of this idiom in Cantonese is “*baak3 nin4 hou2 hap6*”). Eldest brother really loved her, but she was into conservation and cultural research, so she was too busy or whatever.

Ah Meow: Conservation? Oh! Just like Bernard’s girlfriend!

CHAN Hei: Eldest brother’s Monica is bald! And six feet tall!

Since Ah Meow and her current boyfriend CHAN Hung had not known each other for a long time, she asked CHAN Hung’s third brother CHAN Hei to find out about

CHAN Hung's ex-girlfriend Monica. At this time, Ah Meow did not know that Bernard's current girlfriend was CHAN Hung's ex-girlfriend. When CHAN Hei introduced the relationship between CHAN Hung and Monica, he used Cantonese slang to express it. In fact, sometimes using slang can convey information more accurately, but this must be based on both the speaker and the listener being proficient in this language. In fact, Ah Meow is Taiwanese and her Cantonese is not very good, so CHAN Hei used slang to express, which made what he said become obscure. The first three maxims of the cooperative principle focus on what people should say in a conversation, while the manner maxim focuses on how people should say it [12]. Regarding the content, there was nothing wrong with CHAN Hung's first response; nonetheless, the manner in which it was expressed was irrational and violated the manner maxim. Ah Meow inquired more about the significance of this idiom, to which CHAN Hei replied that it signifies "a happy marriage for a century". This expression actually refers to the meeting of a playboy and a lusty woman. This negative slang was described by CHAN Hei as good and he clearly violated the quality maxim. An offensive term that was common to Cantonese became a blessing in CHAN Hei's speech, which caused the audience to chuckle heartily. And Ah Meow further described it through CHAN Hei, and there were clues to discover the truth. In order to avoid everyone being embarrassed, CHAN Hei immediately denied it, saying that CHAN Hung's ex-girlfriend was bald and six feet tall. This is very different from Monica's true image. Forcibly turning a beautiful woman into a monster once again violated the quality maxim. This huge gap with reality makes verbal humor appear again.

3. Conclusion

Cooperative principle is one of the most important theories among pragmatics, and it also provides scholars with a new perspective when studying verbal humor. Based on the four maxims of the cooperative principle, four representative dialogues are chosen from *Table for Six* and analyzed in this article. This study discovers that people occasionally violate the cooperative principle in conversation, even violating several separate maxims in a single sentence, due to the demands of everyday life. That being said, this doesn't always mean that communication stops, and it could even have humorous conversational consequences. In *Table for Six*, the dialogue becomes more interesting precisely because there are a large number of dialogues about violating the cooperative principle. From a theoretical perspective, this article broadens the re-

search field of linguistics and provides a new perspective and theoretical support for other scholars to study Cantonese verbal humor. From a practical perspective, this article has certain guiding significance for how to create verbal humor in Cantonese conversations in reality. Studying Cantonese verbal humor from the standpoint of the cooperative principle is, nevertheless, far from sufficient. In order to improve the pragmatic research on Cantonese, it is anticipated that more academics would employ various theories to undertake in-depth research on it in the future.

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