| **RESEARCH ARTICLE**

Verbal Humor in *The King of Stand-up Comedy* from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle

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| **ABSTRACT**

Humor has long attracted scholarly attention as an important aspect of language and social interaction. Verbal humor is frequently employed by communicators in various contexts to implicitly convey intentions and ease tension, thereby facilitating smooth communication. Recent research on verbal humor has shifted focus from static, isolated words or sentences to dynamic, multimodal texts, such as talk shows, movies, plays, advertisements, and sitcoms. This study adopts the Cooperative Principle as its theoretical framework, using concepts from Incongruity Theory to analyze the processes underlying humor generation in the Chinese stand-up comedy show *The King of Stand-up Comedy*. The analysis shows that violating the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle is a common pragmatic strategy for producing verbal humor. The stand-up comedians often employ rhetorical devices such as metaphor, personification, pun, and hyperbole to flout the four maxims, thereby creating incongruities and generating humorous effects.

| **KEYWORDS**

Chinese stand-up comedy; Verbal humor; Cooperative Principle; Incongruity Theory

1. Introduction
1.1 Background
Humor is a common linguistic phenomenon in both everyday communication and expression. It is often used to ease awkwardness, manage interactional atmosphere, convey attitudes indirectly, build rapport, and reduce interpersonal tension. With the development of media forms, humor has become widely embedded in films, sitcoms, advertising, online texts, and performance-based programs (Attardo, 1997).

In recent years, Chinese stand-up comedy has been a heated performance form of entertainment, with a predominantly young audience and extensive discussion on social media. For example, *The King of Stand-up Comedy* has gained popularity not only because of its program format, but also because its topics often resonate with audience's lived experiences. Research suggests that performance-based humor can provide emotional release and foster a sense of shared understanding among viewers (Kuipers, 2015). However, fine-grained linguistic analysis of humor in Chinese stand-up comedy remains limited, particularly regarding how punchlines are organized at the discourse level and how audiences infer and interpret humorous meaning in context.

In studies on humor, researchers have proposed explanations from semantic, rhetorical, cognitive, and pragmatic perspectives. Among them, incongruity-based accounts argue that humor often arises from a mismatch between expectation and outcome, and that humor comprehension involves detecting an incongruity and revising an initial interpretation (Raskin, 1985; Suls, 1972). While this approach captures key cognitive steps in understanding jokes, it does not directly explain how speakers design discourse to create and manage such mismatches as talk unfolds.

Pragmatic research, by contrast, focuses on how communicators shape interpretation through linguistic choices. Grice's Cooperative Principle provides a framework for explaining how interlocutors achieve mutual understanding by relying on shared conversational norms (Grice, 1975). The principle is specified through four maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. Importantly, speakers may appear to deviate from these maxims to achieve communicative effects such as indirectness, irony, and implication. This makes the Cooperative Principle particularly useful for examining how discourse guides audience inference, and for explaining humor as a pragmatic outcome.

Based on this background, the present study adopts the Cooperative Principle as its main analytical framework and draws on the notion of incongruity to describe the mismatch and reinterpretation involved in humor comprehension. Using routines from *The King of Stand-up Comedy* as data, this study examines how performers organize information and expression in the development of a routine, how they guide audience inference, and how humor emerges through maxim flouting. The study aims to provide a pragmatic account of verbal humor in Chinese stand-up comedy and to clarify the mechanisms through which performance-based humorous discourse achieves its effects.

1.2 Significance
This study contributes in three ways. First, Chinese stand-up comedy has developed rapidly in recent years, yet detailed linguistic analysis of its humorous discourse remains insufficient. By examining *The King of Stand-up Comedy*, this study adds evidence to research on performance-based humor in the Chinese context. Second, by employing the Cooperative Principle as the analytical framework, the study provides a clearer interpretation of how stand-up routines guide audience inference and how humor comprehension is achieved through pragmatic mechanisms. Third, the analysis offers an approach that can be extended to other humor genres, such as variety shows, short videos, and sitcoms.

2. Literature Review
2.1 Previous Studies on Humor
Research on humor has mainly been approached from three perspectives: semantics, pragmatics, and cognitive linguistics.

2.1.1 Semantic perspective
Raskin's (1985) Semantic Script Theory of Humor, SSTH, argues that humor arises from conflicts between opposing scripts. Building on this, Attardo and Raskin (1991) proposed the General Theory of Verbal Humor, GTVH, which identifies six knowledge resources: language, script opposition, target, situation, logical mechanism, and narrative strategy. In China, Wang (2005) applied SSTH to analyze joke structures and emphasized that compatibility between contrasting scripts is crucial for humor. Semantic approaches provide a structured framework for analysis but have limited capacity to explain social interaction or cognitive inference.

2.1.2 Pragmatic perspective
Pragmatic research focuses on the communicative function of humor, drawing on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Relevance Theory, and presupposition theory. Humor often emerges when speakers intentionally flout conversational norms or manipulate audience expectations. Pu (2010) analyzed humor in Chinese skits using both the Cooperative Principle and politeness theory, while Chen and Sun (2012) highlighted that flouting conversational maxims can generate humorous effects. While Relevance Theory clarifies how audiences interpret humor, as demonstrated in Yus's work (2016). Pragmatic perspectives emphasize interaction and inference and offer insights closer to actual communication, although systematic classification of humor types remains limited.

2.1.3 Cognitive linguistic perspective
Cognitive linguistics links humor to mental and inferential processes. Conceptual Integration Theory, initially proposed by Fauconnier and Turner (1996), has been applied to explain how humorous meanings are constructed through conceptual blending and frame-shifting (Coulson, 2001). Wang and Liu (2011) highlighted the role of conceptual metaphor in shaping humorous contexts, and Wei (2016) emphasized that humor generation involves a process of re-representation. Cognitive approaches reveal psychological and inferential mechanisms but often rely on a single method and cover a narrow theoretical scope.

2.2 Previous Studies on Stand-up Comedy
Previous studies have examined stand-up comedies from pragmatics, discourse analysis, rhetoric, and sociolinguistics perspectives. Studies in a pragmatic perspective shed light on humor and audience interpretation through implicature, presupposition, cooperation, politeness, and relevance. Huang (2023) argues that humor in *Rock & Roast* is triggered by a moderate gap between expected and actual interpretations through the pragmatic lens. Researches from a discourse analysis way focus on how information is organized amid interaction, including sequencing, turn-taking, and laugh-relevant moments.

Heritage (1985) provides classic descriptions of coherence, audience involvement, and program flow, while Sheng (2004) extends similar tools to Chinese data. Studies from a rhetorical approach highlight figurative and stylistic devices in stand-up, especially metaphor, irony, and hyperbole. Li and Bai (2017) stress co-construction in performance contexts, and analyses of well-known comedians identify recurring rhetorical patterns (Putri et al., 2016; Rullyanti & Nurdianto, 2019). Sociolinguistic researches on stand-up comedy examine identity, norms, and language variation in stand-up comedies. Winter (1993) addresses gendered strategies, Illie (2001) frames the genre as semi-institutional, and later studies show how multilingual repertoires and localized English varieties negotiate identity and cultural constraints (Vigouroux, 2015; Alzahrani et al., 2025).

Taken together, stand-up comedy has recently gained widespread popularity in China, yet systematic linguistic research on humorous discourse in Chinese stand-up remains limited. Most existing studies focus on foreign programs, leaving local Chinese productions largely under explored. This gap highlights the need for comprehensive analyses of humor in Chinese stand-up, which can advance understanding of humor in performance contexts and inform more nuanced and effective use of humor in everyday communication.

3. Methodology and Data
The dataset for this research has been carefully extracted from a Chinese online comedy program *The King of Stand-up Comedy*. The whole program comprises 10 episodes with an extended runtime of about 90 minutes per episode, allowing for comprehensive humor generation patterns. Following the theoretical guidance of Grice's Cooperative Principle which specifically addressing the maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner (Grice, 1975), a self-built corpus of 15,081 words was constructed through episodes screening and transcription. Given the specific focus on verbal humor mechanisms, the selection criteria explicitly exclude non-linguistic humor elements including but not limited to: para-linguistic features (vocal pitch variations, dramatic pauses), visual comedy (exaggerated facial expressions, body language), regional dialect humor, and technical enhancements (sound effects, editing techniques). By going over all the texts, finally some representative samples are selected to make a qualitative analysis on how humor generated by flouting four maxims of the Cooperative Principle.

4. Analysis
A detailed analysis of humor generation mechanism from the perspectives of the Cooperative Principle will be conducted here. Based on the collected data, several representative examples are given to interpret how each maxim is violated to create incongruities which achieve humor, as well as strategies employed.

4.1 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Quantity
The first maxim of the Cooperative Principle is the maxim of quantity, which states that a speaker's contribution to social communication should be as informative as is required, but information should not be more informative than what in need (Grice, 1975). The stand-up comedians in *The King of Stand-up Comedy* often provide excessive or insufficient information to create humorous effects, which shifts the audience's focus. The excessive irrelevant information or insufficient contextual information causes the audience to have difficulty grasping the main point. This results in a discrepancy between the amount of information the audience holds and the punchlines the speaker introduces, thus leading to incongruity which generates humor.

4.1.1 Less information
Making the contribution as informative as is required is the first maxim. It requires speakers should provide enough information in conversations. If the speaker says less than required, some underlying information may be figured out and thus humorous.

Example 1:
我的女朋友呢，她分不清东南西北。其实现在很多年轻人都不太行，对吧？年轻人不太会用这种 old school 的定位方法，对吧？大家都有一套属于自己的定位系统，找自己的参照物。我的女朋友就是三个参照物，全家、星巴克、地铁站。你问她在哪，她说，我在全家这旁边，有个星巴克，后面就是地铁站。在上海这三句话呢，你说了像没说一样。你站在任何一个地铁站，放眼望去，四个星巴克。
Translation:
My girlfriend, she can't tell directions: north, south, east, west. Actually a lot of young people today have the same problem, right? Young people don't really know how to use these old-school ways to locate, right? Everyone has their own navigation system and reference points. My girlfriend's reference points are three things: FamilyMart, Starbucks, and the subway station. If you ask her where she is, she'll say, "I'm next to the FamilyMart, there's a Starbucks, and the subway station is right behind me." In Shanghai, these three locations basically mean nothing. You can be at any subway station and look around, and there are four Starbucks nearby.

In this text, the stand-up performer, describes how his girlfriend locates herself uses three geographical coordinates: the nearby FamilyMart, Starbucks, and the subway station. She assumes that the performer can find her location based on these three

reference points. However, the girlfriend overlooks that these coordinates are not typical in Shanghai, resulting in insufficient information about her location. As a result, even after hearing this, the speaker is still unable to find her. So, obviously, the location information provided by the girlfriend is nonsense and fails to be the unwanted information by the speaker. Finally, the performer delivers a punchline that humorously points out the lack of information, which violates the maxim of quantity, creating humor.

4.1.2 More information

According to the maxim of quantity, providing more information is also uncooperative as "such over-informativeness may be confusing in that it is liable to raise side issues, and there may also be an indirect effect, in that the hearers may be misled as a result of thinking that there is some particular point in the provision of the excess of information" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Sometimes if a speaker provides too much information which flouts the second maxim of quantity, this might lead to humorous effect.

Example 2:
所以歌里说的是常回家看看对吧，重点就是看看，千万别老在家待着，因为常在家待着一定会发疯的。我最近就是在家待太久了，我发现哦，我爸有点讨厌我哎，可能说讨厌有点严重了，毕竟我们是中华民族对吧，很讲究亲情的血浓于水对吧，我爸恨我。他不喜欢跟我讲话，我问他任何问题，他都是两三个字就回答我了。

Translation:
As the song says, "Visit home often", right? The key part is "visit", but don't stay at home too much, because if you do, you're going to go crazy. Recently, I've been staying at home way too much, and I've noticed something, my dad kind of dislikes me. Well, maybe "dislike" is a bit strong. After all, we're the Chinese nation, right? We value family and blood ties above all, as the Chinese saying going like, blood is thicker than water. My dad hates me. He doesn't like talking to me. Whenever I ask him anything, he responds with just two or three words.

In this text, the maxim of quantity is violated by inserting seemingly unnecessary sentences. For both the former "my dad kind of dislikes me" and latter "my dad hates me", the meaning is almost the same, but in terms of emotional intensity, "hates" is more extreme and intense compared to "kind of dislike". The performer could have only said either "my dad dislikes me" or "my dad hates me", but instead, he inserted the seemingly unnecessary line: "After all, we're the Chinese nation, right? We value family and blood ties above all, as the Chinese saying going like, blood is thicker than water." This line is of redundant information which does not directly contribute to the narrative, as it does not provide any new information about the father-son relationship. However, by introducing this culturally loaded phrase as a setup, the performer prepared the audience a strong expectation of familial harmony and closeness, which would make them guess the sentence or word latter on may be more moderated emotional one or semantically different compared to "dislike". Then, the subsequent punchline, "my dad hates me", starkly contradicts the value presented by the setup, so the incongruity between the expectation of "blood is thicker than water" and the reality of "my dad hates me" generates humor. The excessive sentence, though seemingly irrelevant and useless, amplifies this incongruity, making the punchline more unexpected and thus more effective in eliciting laughter. This violation of the maxim of quantity amplifies the contrast between the setup and the punchline, making the incongruity more pronounced and thus more humorous.

4.2 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Quality

The maxim of quality relates to the truthfulness and authenticity of the words. It requires the speakers not to say what they believe to be false or anything lacking adequate evidence (Grice, 1975). In other words, people should state what they believe is true. However, in daily communication, this maxim is often flouted.

4.2.1 Intentional deception
A. Metaphor
Example 3:
而我这种应届生,就相当于那种没有开封的五仁月饼，包装精美，原料干净，日期新鲜，但就是没人动，而且还是会每年新生产出来一批拿来送给老板，老板说哎呀，饼太多了，吃不完，根本吃不完。

Translation:
As for me, a fresh graduate, I'm like an unopened five-nut mooncake, beautifully packaged, with clean ingredients, and fresh dates. But no one touches me. And every year, a new batch is made and sent to the boss. The boss says, "Oh, there are too many cakes, can't eat them all, no way to finish them."

In this text, the narrator cleverly establishes a metaphor by attributing the characteristics of "unopened five-nut mooncake" to fresh graduates. The source domain is the "unopened mooncake", and the target domain is the "fresh graduate who has not yet found a job." This reflects the awkward situation fresh graduates face when they can't find employment. Fresh graduates usually have good external qualifications (such as education and skills), but for various reasons, they may fail to secure a job, much like

an unopened mooncake that appears fresh but remains unchosen. This metaphor violates the Quality Maxim. By applying the characteristics of an object to a person's situation, it breaks the expectation of truth and logic, creating an absurd effect.

B. Personification
Example 4:
后来是听到一个大姐，她说她是坐飞机过去的，我感觉刚才我还跪在那呢，噌一下就站起来了。她把狗也带上了，她说出去玩十几天，把狗关在家里，狗肯定会抑郁的，一个快乐小狗活着要是不快乐，那和做人还有什么区别！打个包，把狗托运了过去。

Translation:
Later, I heard a woman say she took a flight over. I was just kneeling there a moment ago, and suddenly, I stood up. She brought her dog with her. She said that if she left the dog at home for ten days while she went on vacation, the dog would get depressed. If a happy little dog isn't happy, what's the difference between that and being human? So, she packed the dog and shipped it over.

According to common sense, although dogs have emotions, they do not possess the complex emotional cognition like humans do, especially psychological states like "depression", which are unique to human. The speaker used personification as a rhetorical device, comparing the dog's emotional state to that of humans, attributing emotions like "depression" and "unhappiness" to the dog, just as humans' feelings. This violates the maxim of quality. Furthermore, in a humorous way, the comparison between dogs and humans absurdly suggests that humans live worse lives than dogs, using self-deprecation to create a punchline.

4.2.2 Rootless Information
Hyperbole
Example 5:
我毕业的时候，辅导员还劝我乐观一点，说，翔宇你暂时找不到工作，这个事呢 它有好处，你就可以刚好保留应届生干净的身份。不是，光有这个身份有啥用呀。同学聚会，人家说啊，我现在大厂上班，五险一金顶格。我说那怎么了，我可是应届生，你已经跟资本同流合污了，我还是清清白白。有些人活着，他已经死了，而我就算饿死，我也是应届生，我墓志铭上就写于翔宇，他的一生是应届的，一生没给资本出过一分力。

Translation:
When I graduated, my counselor advised me to stay optimistic. He said, "Xiangyu, you can't find a job right now, but this has its advantages, you get to keep the clean identity of being a fresh graduate." I said, "What's the use of just having that identity?" This may be like: At a class reunion, someone said, "I'm working at a big company now, with the highest social insurance and housing fund." I said, "So what? I'm still a fresh graduate. You've already sold out to the system, but I'm still pure." Some people are already dead even while they're alive, but even if I starve to death, I'll still be a fresh graduate. My epitaph will say: "Yu Xiangyu, his life was that of a fresh graduate. He never contributed a single cent to capital."

At the beginning of the text, the counselor exaggerates the benefits of unemployment, specifically "preserving the clean identity of being a fresh graduate", creating a seemingly reasonable argument that not finding a job actually gives one an advantage. Cause in China, many companies require a fresh-graduate identity when hiring. This statement serves as a setup, giving the audience's expectations for the following dialogue that may present other effects of this identity. The performer then deliberately portrays the difficulty to find a job as a positive "identity preservation" by saying "I'm still a fresh graduate" in the contextualization of a specific situation, at a class reunion. And he exaggerates further by saying, "even if I starve to death, I'll still be a fresh graduate", "His life was that of a fresh graduate. He never contributed a single cent to capital". This self-mockery highlights the absurdity of the current hiring demands, where the actual value of being a fresh graduate is exaggerated to the extreme, completely out of touch with reality, flouting the maxim of quality. This results in a inconsistency with the truth of reality and also misaligns with the audience's expectations eliciting by the setup, creating a reversal that generates humor as the punchlines.

4.3 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Relation
The maxim of relation suggests that speakers should offer information that is connected or related to the subject. A successful conversation is thus realized by conforming to the maxim and providing information relevant to the previous utterance. However, there are certain circumstances where speakers would flout the maxim of relation, deliberately to avoid awkwardness or express their thoughts in a tactful way.

Example 6:
我也不知道为什么，现在大家在手表这个领域，有很多很奇怪的价值观。我有朋友跟我说，电子表都是最 low 的，最厉害的表都是上发条的。我说为什么呢，为什么诶，电不是很伟大的发明吗？富兰克林当年为了发现电的存在，在一个雷雨交加的天气，把钥匙挂在风筝上面去放风筝，这多危险啊，风筝被吹跑了，都没有钥匙回家。

Translation:

I don't know why, but nowadays there are some really strange values when it comes to watches. A friend of mine told me that electronic watches are the most low-end, and the best watches are the ones that need winding. I wondered, Why? Why is that? Isn't electricity a great invention? Back in Franklin's day, to discover the existence of electricity, he flew a kite in a thunderstorm with a key attached to it. How dangerous was that, cause the kite could have been blown away, and he wouldn't even have the key to get home!

In this text, when the actor mentions Franklin's story about discovering electricity with a kite and a key, the audience's natural expectation is that the discussion will delve into the dangers of electricity or the challenges of scientific exploration at the time. However, the comedian quickly shifts focus to the unrelated scenario of "the kite could have been blown away, and he wouldn't even have the key to get home". This sudden shift not only deviates from the original discussion about electricity but also disrupts the logical flow of reasoning. The maxim of relation requires that information in a conversation should be related, and each part of the content should provide the audience with clear cues to ensure smooth continuity. By abruptly introducing an unrelated scenario, the comedian creates a crack in the audience's logical reasoning and expectations, thus violating the maxim of relation and generating incongruity, which produces the humorous effect.

4.4 Verbal Humor by Flouting Maxim of Manner

The maxim of manner, unlike other three maxims, relates not to what is said but, rather, to how what is said to be said. To keep this maxim, the speaker has to i. Avoid obscurity of expression; ii. Avoid ambiguity; iii. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity); iv. Be orderly. That is to say, the speaker must be perspicuous. His or her utterance must be brief, clear and orderly and avoid obscurity or ambiguity (Grice, 1975).

A. Ambiguity of referential pronouns
Example 7:
我说舅妈，你一定要找什么不足之处，就是这个人没有上海户口。
那不行，我不同意，我不同意，你妹妹跟他在一起，我现在就去跟你妹妹说，叫他不要做梦了。
我说对，叫她不要做梦了。

Translation:

I said, Aunt, you always have to find some flaw, it's just that this person doesn't have a *Shanghai hukou* (household registration).

That's not acceptable, I disagree, I disagree. If your sister is with him, I'm going to go talk to your sister right now and tell her to stop letting him (Jackson Wang) dream.

I said, yes, tell her not to dream.

The context of this text is that the stand-up comedian is an HR person. The comedian's aunt discovered that her niece posted a picture of Jackson Wang (a famous singer) on her social media, and since she doesn't recognize him as a celebrity, she assumes the niece is in a relationship with him. She then asks the comedian about his (Jackson Wang's) pros and cons. This leads to the conversation above. From the aunt's perspective, the niece's boyfriend must have a *"Shanghai hukou"*, and she believes anyone without a Shanghai hukou is unqualified to be with her niece. Therefore, she says, "Stop letting him (Jackson Wang) dream". Since the comedian knows that Jackson Wang is a famous celebrity, and believes the niece couldn't possibly be involved with him, he responds, "Yes, tell her not to dream". The words "he" and "she" are pronounced the same in Chinese but refer to entirely different individuals. The aunt's "he" refers to Jackson Wang, while the comedian's "she" refers to the niece. This creates ambiguity in reference, as they sound the same but, based on context, have different meanings, violating the maxim of manner, specifically the requirement to avoid ambiguity. From the aunt's perspective, she believes the comedian agrees with her, but the audience, who knows Jackson Wang is a celebrity, will realize that the two "ta" refer to different people, thus recognizing this as the punchline and experiencing the humorous effect.

B. Pun
Example 8:
只有我们脱口秀演员还在坚持多元的丑，这份坚持很可贵啊，因为如果人类都去疯狂地磨骨消腮的话，就这么进化下去，总有一天人类就进化得失去自己的腮帮子了，那样人类会变得很脆弱的，因为我们遇到困难都有办法咬紧牙关了。

Translation: Only we stand-up comedians are still insisting on the diversity of ugliness. This persistence is really valuable because if everyone in humanity goes crazy trying to shave down their bones and slim their jaws, and this continues evolving, eventually humans will evolve to losing their jaw muscles. That would make humanity very fragile, because when we face difficulties, we wouldn't even be able to clench our teeth.

The punchline of this joke lies in the use of pun as the rhetoric device in the phrase "clench our teeth". In Chinese, it has two meanings. One refers to physically clenching the jaw, using the strength of the mouth and teeth to tightly bite down. This action typically involves the power of the jaw and the biting force. If someone undergoes cosmetic surgery to remove their jaw muscles and bones, they wouldn't be able to clench their teeth properly because the jaw's function would be weakened or eliminated. The second, this very common expression is often used to describe a one's resilient and determined attitude in the face of adversity, meaning that even in difficult situations, people endure and persist steadfastly. The setup in the joke initially refers to physical jaw reshaping, leading the audience to expect the first meaning. But then, the premise shifts to "when we face difficulties," and "clench our teeth" is now understood in the second meaning. By exploiting the two different meanings of the phrase, ambiguity is created, and the meaning of the language becomes less direct and clear, increasing the complexity of information, thus violating the maxim of manner. Because the meaning has changed, the audience's expectations are overturned, resulting in a humorous effect due to the incongruity.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how verbal humor is realized in the Chinese online comedy *The King of Stand-up Comedy* from the perspective of the Cooperative Principle, revealing that humor often arises from deliberate violations of the four maxims of the Cooperative Principle. By flouting the maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, speakers create incongruities that subvert audience expectations. Rhetorical devices such as personification, metaphor, hyperbole, and puns are employed to flout these maxims and amplify incongruity, thereby generating humorous effects.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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