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The Violation of the Cooperative Principles in Conan

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Abstract

This paper, based on Gricean Cooperative Principles, attempts to analyze the violation of the Cooperative Principles in the TV talk show *Conan* from the perspective of pragmatics, thus to figure out the conversational implications generated by the application of the Cooperative Principles.

Key words: Cooperative Principles; violation; *Conan*

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INTRODUCTION

TV talk show, as a special conversational form transmitted through mass media, has caught much attention of linguists. In TV talk show, the cooperation of the hosts and the guests is a significant factor in deciding whether the program can be successful or not. This paper mainly discusses the conversational implications generated by the application of the Cooperative Principles, and the reason why the host and guests take these pragmatic strategies.

1. CURRENT STUDIES ON TV TALK SHOW

Scholars have done lots of studies of TV talk show from different perspectives due to this genre's popularity and

specialty. In linguistic academia, linguists have been devoted to analyzing language used in TV talk show from the perspective of genre analysis, conversation analysis and sociolinguistics.

Genre analysis is an effective way to analyze the communicative patterns of TV talk show. Gregori (2000) points out that the genre of America Tabloid talk show is a social speech event whose rules of interaction are accepted and shared by a community which has the common knowledge of these rules. She indicates that this genre, which is dynamic and connected with socio-cultural features, has social functions. Gregori also hypothesizes that the TV talk show is a quasi-conversational or non-formal television genre.

Scholars explore conversational structure of TV talk show to identify the differences related to specific institutional settings, the responsibilities and roles of the participants between daily conversations and conversations of TV talk shows. Cao and Wang (2002) holds that the conversational sequence in TV talk shows is more systematic than that in daily conversations. In TV talk shows, hosts control the turn distribution to ensure the program going on smoothly; guests are supposed to be adapted to hosts' arrangement. But in daily conversation, no one controls the turn distribution; speakers can talk to each other freely. The adjacency pairs in the TV talk shows are usually in Question-Answer format, that is to say, the host asks questions and then the guests answer them.

In sociolinguistics, researchers focus on how social factors like sex, social status and age influence the behaviors of hosts and guests in TV talk shows. Tracy (1991) argues that the sociolinguists generally believe that conversation in TV talk shows is one of the most purposeful forms of social actions.

TV talk show has mostly been discussed from the angle of conversational structure, sociolinguistics, or genre analysis; the current studies are mostly based on static corpus instead of dynamic one. These studies examine the

utterances of TV talk shows on the structural level; they can not explain why the participants choose to say something ambiguous, irrelevant or even something they believe to be false, why they violate the Cooperative Principles unconsciously or intentionally, and what conversational implications are generated by these violations. Hence, how the participants' utterances purposefully employ these pragmatic strategies to achieve the desired effects may be identified. The paper will analyze several cases selected from the TV talk show program *Conan*.

2. THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES

Grice (1967) thought all the verbal social communications are geared to some specific purpose. He defined the Cooperative Principle as "some generally accepted principle which the speakers and the hearers are restricted to".

There are four maxims of the Cooperative Principles:

The Maxim of Quantity

(a) Make your contribution as informative as is required.

(b) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of Quality

(a) Do not say what you believe to be false

(b) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim of Relation:

Be relevant

The Maxim of Manner

(a) Avoid obscurity of expression

(b) Avoid ambiguity

(c) Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

(d) Be orderly

People hope that all the participants observe the principles in order to communicate efficiently. But in daily conversations, speakers usually violate the principles for particular purposes such as question-eschewing, euphemism, politeness, face-saving, instigation, threat and so on. Thus the conversational implications are generated.

3. THE VIOLATION OF THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLES IN CONAN

3.1 Violation of the Maxim of Quantity

The speaker usually provides non-informative information or less or more information than it requires when they violate the Maxim of Quantity.

(1) Conan: You worked out through every stage then?

Dick: Right. My motivation changed over years. In my 30s, I worked out to look good. In my 50s, to stay fit. In my 70s, I did it to stay ambulatory. Now I do it avoid assisted living.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

In this case, the violation caused by Dick's contribution for the current exchange is more informative

than is required (Maxim of Quantity 2). Conan, the host of this program, asks whether Dick (the guest) keeps doing fitness exercises or not, answers like "Yes, I do" or "No, I don't" are quite informative for Conan's question. But Dick informs his purposes of doing exercises at different stages, it is obvious that Dick says "Now I do it avoid assisted living" just for humor. This is exactly because Dick is a comedian, he wants to amuse the audience, and by doing so, Dick can make the audience fond of him and his new film.

(2) Dick: Yeah, so I thought we're going to be on a bike or something. And what was the lady's name, that famous photographer?

Conan: I think it is Annie Leborvitz. She is one of the greatest photographers of all time.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

The information that Dick requires is the photographer's name, he does not mean to know anything about the lady's fame. But Conan tells Dick that the photographer's name is Annie, and she is "one of the greatest photographers of all time". Conan's answer violates the first principle of the Maxim of quantity by giving the redundant introduction of Annie's fame. In fact, this redundant information indicates Conan's appreciation of Annie.

(3) Dick: (To Conan) Have you ever danced?

Conan: Well, I danced. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a trap dancer, but I didn't study it for a long time.

Dick: You didn't try?

Conan: I was beaten senselessly by the neighborhood kids. I said I want to be a dancer. Bang! And I woke up...

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Instead of answering Dick's question directly, Conan tells his own experience, and implies that he wants to dance but has no chance. Conan violates the second principle of the Maxim of Quantity because of the wordy narration of his experience. Actually, the implication is that Conan wants Dick to teach him how to dance and to show the audience his dance skill by teaching Conan.

(4) Conan: It's on every channel; you cannot miss *It's a Wonderful Life*...

Jenny: I don't know.

Conan: It's every where.

Jenny: I grew up without cable. I just watch *Beaches on Hanukkah*. I don't know, I just don't know.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Conan thinks that it is unbelievable that Jenny hasn't watched *It's a Wonderful Life* until recently, because it is really popular in the United States, almost everyone watches it every year. In fact, Jenny just needs to say "I don't know it at all" to explain she knew nothing about this film before, but she says "I grew up without cable. I just watch *Beaches on Hanukkah*". This answer violates the second principle of the Maxim of Quantity by providing too much more information than it is required. Undoubtedly, Jenny is intended to amuse audience to some degree.

3.2 Violation of the Maxim of Quality

Speakers violate the Maxim of Quality by saying something that is not true or lack adequate evidence.

(5) Conan: Talking about a picture Dick took with Mary...
Dick: I thought we're going to be on a bike or something...
I'll get you for this Annie. They said just get on your knees a minute.
Conan: Come on! You are so naïve. At what point does it dawn to you it's not a motorcycle thing?

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

By saying "You are so naïve", Conan violates the first principle of the Maxim of Quality, because he knows exactly that Dick, who is at the age of 89, is absolutely not naïve. What Conan implies is that it is unbelievable Dick knows nothing about what he is going to do; why he didn't figure out that "it is not a motorcycle thing".

(6) Dick: ...and he got to the car before I could get my stuff. He meant well ... and I tried to sell the car to the fireman before.
Conan: You were trying to sell it as it burned?
Dick: Yeah.
Conan: That's nice. That's very good.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Although Conan says "that's nice, that's very good", obviously by saying something he believes to be false to violate the first principle of the Maxim of Quality, he cannot believe what Dick has done. It's normal for people to escape when a car gets on fire, but Dick picks up his stuff and wants to sell his car to the fireman. Conan feels so speechless, not nice or good at all.

(7) Dick: They said, "No, it's fine." They cut it out, or I'd holding an Oscar right this minute.
Conan: You can't hold an Oscar right now. They don't give them away before the movie.
Dick: Oh, they don't? It's funny.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Dick has been a comedian for decades, he knew exactly when the Oscar will be given away. The violation is caused by Dick points to the thing he believes to be false on purposely (Maxim of Quality 1). Dick's behavior is partly because of his character; partly because of the requirement of this program. He wants to be humorous enough to get the audience's appreciation.

(8) Jenny: ... And I was watching the movie *Eraser over Thanksgiving*.
Conan: I don't think I've seen that one.
Jenny: Yeah! That's what makes it perfect for a bad Schwarzenegger impression; it's totally lost to time.
Conan: Schwarzenegger is going to love this interview.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Jenny thinks the movie *Eraser over Thanksgiving* is not popular and few people have watched it, so it is perfect for her impression, because no one will know whether her impression is good or not. Actually Jenny violates the second principle of the Maxim of Quality because she lacks adequate evidence to prove the film really unpopular. And Conan violates the first principle

of the Maxim of Quality, because Conan knows Schwarzenegger will not like this kind of judgment of his movie, but he says "Schwarzenegger is going to love this interview", that is the thing he believes to be false. In fact, it indicates that Conan feels unsatisfied about Jenny's negative comment on Schwarzenegger's movie.

3.3 Violation of the Maxim of Relation

The violation of the Maxim of Relation is caused by speakers saying something irrelevant to the topic.

(9) Conan: You know what? We —It's so great to have you here.
Dick: I used to be tall. (Because Conan is tall)
Conan: You used to be tall? Hahaha... How tall were you when you were at your highest point?
Dick: I was about 6'2". Now I'm about 5'11". I thought they were making my pants too long.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

This conversation happens at the moment when Dick comes out, instead of responding to Conan's greeting, he talks about his height which is not germane to the current talk. Dick violates the Maxim of Relation by starting an irrelevant topic. The audience cannot help laughing when hearing Dick saying "I thought they were making my pants too long". Actually, Dick's purpose is to leave an approachable impression on the audience and the host at the beginning of this show.

(10) Conan: I have something to ask you. First of all, I don't often mention ages here but this is something to be really proud of —you just turned 89.
Dick: 89, exactly.
Conan: Wow! I'm going to ask you something that you're in better shape than most people I know in their 50s. You're in incredible shape. How'd this come to be? Did you always take care of yourself? ...

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

We can see that it's Conan who starts the topic of age, but when Dick gives Conan the answer, Conan changes topic for fitness immediately. This new topic has nothing to do with to the topic of age. The reason why he violates the Maxim of Relation is that the host is responsible for controlling the process of the program. By changing topics; the host can ensure the program moving on successfully. What's more, although 89 years old is "something to be really proud of", age is not a good topic to talk a lot.

(11) Conan: You worked out through every stage then?
Dick: Right. My motivation changed over years. In my 30s, I worked out to look good. In my 50s, to stay fit. In my 70s, I did it to stay ambulatory. Now I do it avoid assisted living.
Conan: You know what's amazing to me is that I've always thought you had one of the best faces in the business, just such a great comedic face and so alive. Then I'm told at a point in your career you were told that you should get worked on.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Conan changes the topic from fitness to face-lifting suddenly, without responding Dicks' answer. It's because Conan gets the information he requires, there's no need to

talk about this topic any more, by violating the Maxim of Relation (by changing the topic), he can move on to the next topic.

3.4 Violation of the Maxim of Manner

The violation of the Maxim of Manner happens when the speaker provides ambiguous or disordered information. Sometimes the speaker violates the Maxim of Manner in order to avoid some embarrassing or unpleasant things in a direct way.

(12) Conan: Look, these gifts are wonderful, Ellen is terrific. I just can't do it.

Audience: Come on, if Ellen can give away a silver toilet filled with ancient Asian Rubies, why can't you?

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

In this case, the audience is trying to tell Conan that Ellen (host of *Ellen Show*) gave her a toilet as a gift. But she describes it as "a silver toilet filled with ancient Asian Rubies". The audience violates the third principle of "be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)" (Maxim of Manner 3). On one hand, this kind of verbose description shows the audience's appreciation of Ellen and the gift; on the other hand, it shows the audience's dissatisfaction of Conan because there is no gift in *Conan*.

(13) Conan: ... You do a very unique one. Like most people quote famous movie lines, but yours Schwarzenegger is completely unique.

Jenny: Yes, I know you're being kind, because we know it's bad. I think the quotes are obscure, first of all, it's not like "It's a tumor." (Not as directly as "it's a tumor")

Conan: Or "I will be back." (script of the movie)

Jenny: No, eh, yes.

Conan: You should check that movie out. (Laughing)

Jenny: I don't think it's popular. But I came here before...

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

Jenny quotes two sentences from a movie she has never watched before, so Conan tells her "You should check that movie out". Jenny has no intention to watch it, so she responds in an ambiguous way by saying "I don't think it's popular". She violates the principle of "avoid ambiguity" to express her unwillingness politely without hurting others' feelings.

(14) Conan: What are the holiday films you love to watch?

Jenny: So many good ones. It used to be *Home Alone* up until this year. ... But I was an airplane the other night, and I saw "*It's a wonderful life*" and I was just

Conan: Wait a minute; you hadn't seen "*It's a wonderful life*"

before.

Jenny: You know I'm Jewish. I don't like get into the Christmas thing that much.

(Conan, 2014.12.16)

"*It's a wonderful life*" is so popular that every American watches it on Christmas, so Conan is surprised when Jenny says that she has never watched it before. In order to cover up her embarrassment, Jenny says "I'm Jewish. I don't like get into the Christmas thing that much". This response violates the principle of avoiding "ambiguity", for Jenny expresses herself indirectly. Actually, the implication of this sentence is that why I should be the same with anyone else, it is ridiculous to watch a movie just because everyone else loves watching it.

SUMMARY

Based on the cases above, it can be discerned that a detailed analysis of the violations of Cooperative Principles in TV talk shows may provide a deep insight into conversational implications embedded in utterances. The deployment of appropriate pragmatic strategies helps the host and the guest to communicate successfully. For the host, using the Cooperative Principles skillfully can help them express themselves more politely and control the process of the program better. For the guests, by violating the Cooperative Principles, they can avoid answering awkward questions or saying harsh words which may ruin the harmonious atmosphere.

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