

A Study on Verbal Humor in *The Lord of Losers* from the Perspective of Violating the Politeness Principle

Yong Tang^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China

Email Address

ty121382022@163.com (Yong Tang)

*Correspondence: ty121382022@163.com

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Abstract:

Politeness holds great significance in everyday verbal communication, and individuals unconsciously desire respect, appreciation, and the resolution of potential conflicts, which ensures smooth communication between parties. However, in certain movies and TV series, the principle of politeness is intentionally violated for comedic effect. Hence, this paper adopts Leech's Politeness Principle as the theoretical framework for analyzing the humorous dialogues that breach this principle in the Chinese sitcom *The Lord of Losers*. The focus is on exploring the humorous effects achieved through the violation of different maxims. The aim is to provide the audience with a pragmatic perspective for interpreting the show, allowing for a deeper understanding and appreciation of its verbal charm and the joy that language brings to life.

Keywords:

Politeness Principle, Sitcom, Verbal Humor

1. Introduction

1.1. Background information

Language is a crucial tool for human communication in daily life. It allows individuals to express their intentions and emotions directly, serving as the most fundamental form of communication [6]. As social beings living within specific cultural contexts, humans' speech acts are inevitably influenced by social and cultural norms [15]. Politeness represents an external reflection of an individual's ideological and moral development, cultural refinement, and communicative competence.

Moreover, it constitutes the minimum ethical standards that individuals collectively uphold to ensure the normal functioning of society. In order to facilitate successful conversational communication, language users must adhere to certain standards and guidelines, known as pragmatic principles. One such principle is the Politeness Principle, which was introduced by the renowned British scholar Geoffrey Leech in 1983. Nevertheless, in everyday life, individuals occasionally purposefully deviate

from the Politeness Principle in their communication, which can lead to unexpected humorous effects, as often seen in sitcoms.

Chinese sitcom *The Lord of Losers* aired exclusively on IQiyi Video on June 18, 2022. The show tells the story of seven employees with very different personalities who form a department that is not valued by the company, and their main job is to deal with the work that the other departments don't want to do. What they have in common is that they are all underdogs, they have endless and boring tasks to do every day, but in the dull work they also produce a lot of funny stories.

Therefore, from the perspective of Politeness Principle, this paper conducts a verbal humor study of the dialogues violating Politeness Principle in the Chinese sitcom *The Lord of Losers*. The focus is on exploring the humorous effects achieved through the violation of different maxims.

1.2. Research objectives

The paper aims to study the verbal humor that violate the Politeness Principle in the Chinese sitcom *The Lord of Losers* and enhance understanding of the Politeness Principle in verbal humor by analyzing specific dialogues. It explores how verbal humor can be achieved by violating the Politeness Principle and examines whether such violations consistently result in humorous effects. By providing a pragmatic interpretation perspective, this study deepens the audience's comprehension of the significance of the Politeness Principle in verbal humor. Additionally, it helps to cultivate a greater understanding of the linguistic allure of the show and the role of language in adding enjoyment to life. This study addresses the following two primary questions:

- (1) How do dialogues in *The Lord of Losers* that violate the Politeness Principle achieve verbal humor?
- (2) Do the dialogues in *The Lord of Losers* that violate the Politeness Principle always convey humorous effects?

1.3. Framework of the paper

This paper consists of five sections. Section 1 serves as the introduction, providing a concise overview of the background, purpose, and framework of the paper. Section 2 undertakes a comprehensive literature review of pertinent studies. Section 3 conducts an analysis of the dialogues in *The Lord of Losers* that violate the Politeness Principle. Section 4 engages in discussions of the analysis, and the final section presents summarized conclusions of the entire text.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Verbal humor

In contemporary society, humor pervades various aspects of life, presenting itself in a multitude of forms. Apart from utilizing language, humor can also be conveyed through expressions, actions, images, and other mediums. However, this paper solely focuses on verbal humor, which encompasses the humorous effects achieved through the exceptional utilization of diverse language elements.

Nash [10] argued that for most people, humor is not just a pleasant decoration of life. Freud [5] believed that verbal humor arises through the use of different linguistic

skills and conceptual jokes generated by the concepts they express. According to Delia Chiaro [3], there is much to laugh at in the human world, and humour can be revealed and mocked under the veil of a good-natured smile.

For verbal humor, many domestic scholars have given their own definitions. Suo Zhenyu [12] argued that verbal humor is a kind of mental phenomenon that appeals to reason, which is the crystallization of the thoughts, learning, experience and wisdom of the language users. Verbal humor is a kind of emotional thinking method, which requires people to follow not only the usual rational logic law, but also the law of verbal communication. The logic in verbal humor is often different from the logic of rational thought. People often make use of logical errors or deliberately violate logical laws to create linguistic humor [14]. Verbal humor is a vivid and interesting form of language expression for people to express their views and ideas in the process of communication, and it is an important part of the diversity of human language forms [9].

The use of verbal humor can be seen everywhere in all areas of life, such as people's daily communication, talk shows and sitcoms. The author contends that verbal humor is the art of communicating with one's words in such a way that the arrangement of the words is altered appropriately to produce humor, which is then conveyed to the receiver and to the extent that both parties approve of it.

2.2. Politeness Principle

"Politeness" is a code of conduct of moral and ethical significance for human beings in social production and real life, and it is a sign of human civilization [2]. In language activities, following the principle of politeness is an essential aspect of cooperative conversation, which plays an important role in the realization of communication between people. According to Geoffrey Leech, communicators generally observe a number of rules of good behavior, which he termed the Politeness Principle. This principle can explain why people are sometimes indirect in conveying what they mean.

The Politeness Principle, as formulated by Leech [8], is widely characterized as the act of minimizing impolite expressions while maximizing the use of polite expressions, given equal circumstances. The degree of politeness may vary between individuals during communication, and the use of language that benefits the listener can be detrimental to the speaker. In other words, the principle involves elevating others while demeaning oneself, ultimately benefiting others and detracting from oneself. The Politeness Principle consists of six maxims and twelve sub-maxims (see in Table 1).

Table 1. The six maxims and twelve sub-maxims of Leech's Politeness Principle.

Maxims	Sub-maxims
I. Tact Maxim (in directives and commissives)	Minimize cost to other
	Maximize benefit to other
II. Generosity Maxim (in directives and commissives)	Minimize benefit to self
	Maximize cost to self
III. Approbation Maxim (in expressives and representatives)	Minimize dispraise of other
	Maximize praise of other
IV. Modesty Maxim (in expressives and representatives)	Minimize praise of self
	Maximize dispraise of self
V. Agreement Maxim	Minimize disagreement between self and other

	Maximize agreement between self and other
VI. Sympathy Maxim	Minimize antipathy between self and other
	Maximize sympathy between self and other

The Politeness Principle is mainly to safeguard the interests of the listener or others. Brown and Levinson [1] believed that in order to maintain peaceful relations, communicating parties choose appropriate ways of communicating, try to use polite language and follow common principles.

However, despite the ubiquity of politeness norms across social groups, individuals occasionally choose to deliberately deviate from these norms in everyday communication, leading to humorous outcomes. Unsurprisingly, this violation of politeness principles is also frequently witnessed in sitcoms, where characters' dialogues purposefully defy expected norms, resulting in unexpected and comical punchlines that amplify the comedic impact.

Therefore, this paper adopts Leech's Politeness Principle as the theoretical framework for the analysis of verbal humor in the dialogues that violate the Politeness Principle in the Chinese sitcom *The Lord of Losers*.

3. An Analysis of Verbal Humor in *The Lord of Losers* Based on the Violation of Politeness Principle

In daily interactions, individuals should strive to adhere to the Politeness Principle to the greatest extent possible. However, in sitcoms, intentional violations of these maxims are commonly employed in order to elicit comedic effects. In the subsequent sections, we will examine the ways in which verbal humor produces these effects through the infringement of the Politeness Principle, as well as whether such violations consistently yield the intended humorous outcomes.

3.1. Verbal humor resulting from violation of Tact Maxim

(1) Context: Hu Qiang is transferred to the Emergency Task Handling Department as a department manager, and his boss Lanny asks Hu if he needs help. The following is a conversation between Hu Qiang and Lenny.

兰尼: 最近工作还顺利吗? 有困难就尽管说。

Lanny: How's work going these days? Let me know if you have any problems.

胡强: 那我直说了, 我想招点人手。

Hu Qiang: Let me get it straight. I want to hire some people.

兰尼: 不行。

Lanny: No.

胡强: 说好的有困难就尽管说呢?

Hu Qiang: Where's "Let you know if I have problems"?

兰尼: 我又没说一定能解决。

Lanny: I'm not saying it's going to work out.

The Tact Maxim requires that the speaker minimize cost to others and maximize benefit to others. In this example, it is evident that Lanny violated the Tact Maxim. Initially, Lanny displays concern and a willingness to assist by asking Hu Qiang if he requires help. However, Lanny subsequently rejects Hu Qiang's request outright,

without providing any explanation or suggesting alternative solutions. Hu Qiang is taken aback by Lanny's response, and this sudden turn of events introduces an element of unexpected humor.

3.2. Verbal humor resulting from violation of Generosity Maxim

(2) Context: Hu Qiang and his team received an assignment to assist a popular star named Xiao Hong Hong to shoot a promotional advertisement for their company. Xiao Hong Hong's agent made all kinds of rude requests to Hu Qiang. Hu Qiang had to ask his subordinate Pang Xiaobai to pretend to be Lanny to talk to the agent. The following is a conversation between Pang Xiaobai and the agent.

庞小白: 您有什么要求尽管提, 我兰尼一定满足。

Pang Xiaobai: *If you have any requirements, please feel free to ask, I, Lanny, will fulfill them.*

经纪人: 休息室里为什么没有花?

Agent: *Why aren't there any flowers in the lounge?*

庞小白: 合同里没有提到休息室需要摆放花啊。

Pang Xiaobai: *There is no mention in the contract that flowers need to be placed in the lounge.*

经纪人: 合同是死的, 人是活的, 赶紧去安排去!

Agent: *Contracts are dead, but people are alive, hurry to arrange it!*

Generosity Maxim requires the speaker to minimize benefit to self and maximize cost to self. In this example, the agent violated the Generosity Maxim. During the conversation, Pang Xiaobai expressed his willingness to fulfill the agent's request, but the agent made a seemingly unreasonable request for flowers in the lounge. Pang Xiaobai pointed out that this request was not included in the contract, but the agent emphasized that "Contracts are dead, but people are alive", so the agent did not take into account the other party's actual situation and reasonableness, but forced the other party to satisfy and maximize his own benefits.

3.3. Verbal humor resulting from violation of Approbation Maxim

(3) Context: Due to receiving a sea of tasks thrown over from other departments, Hu Qiang's subordinate Pang Xiaobai couldn't help but start a temper tantrum against Hu Qiang. The following is a conversation between Hu Qiang and Pang Xiaobai.

胡强: 小白, 你怎么了?

Hu Qiang: *Xiaobai, what's wrong with you?*

庞小白: 你就像风一样轻盈, 像花一样鲜艳, 像山一样沉稳。总之一句话, 你没一点像人。

Pang Xiaobai: *You're as light as the wind, as bright as a flower, and as calm as a mountain. In a word, you're not a bit like a human being.*

Approbation Maxim requires the speaker to minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. In this example, Pang Xiaobai's answer violates the Approbation Maxim. Although Pang Xiaobai's first few sentences are words of praise for Hu Qiang, his last reply is ironic and sarcastic, implying that Hu Qiang is not a human being. This response clearly violates the Approbation Maxim because it does not express respect and appreciation for Hu Qiang. From the perspective of humor, Pang Xiaobai's response is a form of sarcasm and irony, and the contrast between the

expectations of Hu Qiang and his actual performance may be somewhat comical and absurd. This unexpected reversal and Pang Xiaobai's blunt expression will trigger humor.

3.4. Verbal humor resulting from violation of Modesty Maxim

(4) Context: Everyone eats at the company's restaurant, discussing the company's chairman, while Tang Haixing fantasizes about meeting the chairman. The following is a conversation between Tang Haixing and Ouyang Mofei.

唐海星：你们说董事长更喜欢我哪种笑容？

Tang Haixing: Which smile do you guys think the chairman prefers from me?

欧阳莫非：你转过身去背对着我们，这样就完美了。

Ouyang Mofei: You turn around and turn your back to us, then that's perfect.

唐海星：难怪背后总有很多女生偷看我，原来我的后脑勺魅力爆棚！

Tang Haixing: No wonder there are always a lot of girls peeking at me behind my back, so the back of my head is full of charm!

Modesty Maxim requires the speaker to minimize praise of self and maximize dispraise of self. In this example, Tang Haixing's response violates the Modesty Maxim. His statement can be characterized as a form of self-promotion and self-centeredness, as he suggests that the attractiveness of the back of his head is significant to the extent that it secretly captures the attention of numerous girls. This response blatantly disregards the Modesty Maxim, as it reflects a sense of vanity and arrogance, rather than humility and self-restraint. From a comedic standpoint, Tang Haixing's narcissistic attitude and exaggerated portrayal of his charm elicit humor by contrasting with the actual reality of the situation, thus generating a humorous effect.

3.5. Verbal humor resulting from violation of Agreement Maxim

(5) Context: The following is a conversation between Ouyang Mofei and Pang Xiaobai, which takes place after the scene in Example 3

欧阳莫非：没想到你比剃须刀片还薄的脑子里，居然还能蹦出几句像样的惹人话来。

Ouyang Mofei: I didn't think that your brain, which is thinner than a razor blade, could actually pop out a few bad words.

庞小白：还不是您教的好。你脑子里只有二氧化锰和浓酸盐，导致你说话颠三倒四、乱七八糟。

Pang Xiaobai: It's because you taught me well. You only have manganese dioxide and concentrated hydrochloric acid in your head, causing you to speak in a disorganized manner.

Agreement Maxim requires the speaker to minimize disagreement between self and other and maximize agreement between self and other. In this conversation, Pang Xiaobai's response violates the Agreement Maxim. Instead of conveying agreement or endorsement, his response assumes the guise of critique and reproach towards Ouyang Mofei. Pang Xiaobai adopts a sarcastic and ironic tone in addressing Ouyang Mofei, insinuating that his cogitation is muddled and his articulation is lacking clarity. This manifestly infringes upon the Mofei, thereby eliciting astonishment and amusement among the audience due to the unexpected nature of the retort.

3.6. Verbal humor resulting from violation of Sympathy Maxim

(6) Context: Lisa, the director of the third business group, needed a slogan about working hard. Hu Qiang and his team wrote a poem about wanting to take a vacation. The following is a conversation between Hu Qiang and Lisa.

丽萨：这次的宣传语公司员工都转发了。既然是大家自发提出的设想，领导决定尊重员工的想法，在第三事业群展开强制休假。

Lisa: The slogan this time was forwarded by the company's employees. Since it was a spontaneous idea from everyone, the leaders decided to respect the employees' ideas and launch a mandatory vacation in the third business group.

胡强：强制休假？

Hu Qiang: Mandatory vacation?

丽萨：上一天班，休息一天，休息时间没有工资。

Lisa: One day on, one day off, and there is no pay for the day off.

Sympathy Maxim requires the speaker to minimize antipathy between self and other and maximize sympathy between self and other. In this conversation, Lisa violates Sympathy Maxim. Her response is a mockery and denial of Hu's and his team's ideas, emphasizing the mandatory time off and pointing out that the time off is not paid, which is a clear violation of the Sympathy Maxim. Simultaneously, it introduces an element of amusement.

4. Discussions

In film and television dramas, characters can achieve humorous effects in most cases by using violating the Politeness Principle, thus the audience is more impressive. Humorous language can enhance the artistic charm of TV dramas, delight the audience and make them know themselves and life in a relaxed and witty atmosphere [13].

Through the aforementioned six examples, it becomes apparent that there exists a substantial number of plot developments within films and television dramas wherein the Politeness Principle is deliberately violated in order to generate humorous effects. In the case of *The Lord of Losers*, the characters employ various rhetorical devices, such as similes, hyperbole, metaphors, irony, and sarcasm, as a means to violate the Politeness Principle, thereby augmenting the humorous effects.

However, during the process of analysis, it becomes evident that in certain examples, the humorous effects resulting from the violation of the Politeness Principle are not particularly strong or appropriate. In fact, in some cases, it may even cause some discomfort for the audience, as certain humorous effects are generated through the use of irony and sarcasm.

Consequently, it is not feasible to violate the Politeness Principle in order to achieve humorous effects in any given scenario. For instance, engaging in such violations during conversations with unfamiliar individuals or with one's own leaders and superiors may result in unnecessary misunderstandings.

5. Conclusions

Sense of humor plays a very important role in people's daily communication, and those who have a sense of humor are also more personally attractive. Sandrine [11] believes that verbal humor is the best way to avoid some awkward scenes in daily life.

If acquaintances are unwilling or impossible to satisfy each other's needs, they can use humor and reject each other half-jokingly so that both parties will not feel embarrassed and will not hurt each other's self-esteem [4].

The Politeness Principle is a rather significant principle in pragmatics. He Ziran and Ran Yongping [7] argued when communicating, the speaker often tries to benefit others more or give them more convenience, and tries to benefit himself less and suffer more, so that the other party feels respected, and in turn the listener or the third party will feel good about the speaker, thus forming a virtuous circle of mutual politeness.

However, people do not abide by the Politeness Principle in every place, at every time, and sometimes when communicating with everyone, in order to achieve the effect of verbal humor, speakers will deliberately violate the Politeness Principle. Through the analysis of verbal humor in the sitcom *The Lord of Losers*, this paper explores how people achieve humorous effects in their daily lives by violating the Politeness Principle. It can be found that the characters often employ various rhetorical devices, such as similes, hyperbole, metaphors, irony, and sarcasm, etc., to violate one of the maxims in Politeness Principle to achieve a certain communicative purpose, and to create a relaxing and enjoyable atmosphere, which produces a humorous effect; at the same time, it further enhances the audience's comprehension of the significance of the Politeness Principle in verbal humor, fostering a deeper appreciation of the show's verbal charm and the inherent amusement language brings to life.

It is essential to note that in everyday life, the violation of the Politeness Principle typically occurs in situations where the parties involved have a close relationship. Therefore, it is not appropriate to violate the Politeness Principle in order to achieve humorous effects in all contexts. For instance, when interacting with unfamiliar individuals or one's own leaders and superiors, violating the Politeness Principle can result in unnecessary misunderstandings.

In conclusion, while violating the Politeness Principle can indeed be humorous, it is crucial to adhere to this principle in our daily interactions. We should be mindful of the context and the appropriate level of politeness, as disregarding these aspects can cause discomfort to others.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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