

AMBIGUITY AS HUMOR UTTERED BY SHERLOCK HOLMES IN ‘SHERLOCK HOLMES BBC SERIES’

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A B S T R A C T

Intentional ambiguities are frequently used as humor by many entertainment media to maintain its serious nuance. However, since they are ambiguous, most of the humor fails to be recognized by audience. Under this circumstance, the researcher is attracted to analyze humorous ambiguities found in each season of ‘Sherlock Holmes BBC Series’ and how they produce humor as they violate Grice’s maxims of Cooperative Principle. There found three from four maxims violated by Sherlock to produce ambiguities as humor. Those are maxim of quantity, maxim of relation, and maxim of manner. By violating those maxims, utterances become ambiguous and construct several possible meanings which are potentially humorous. The study is expected to improve entertainment media’s creativity to produce similar kinds of humor. At the same time, it offers a great help for the audience to recognize and understand ambiguities, thus regain them better sense of humor.

KEYWORDS : Ambiguity, humor, Grice’s maxims, Cooperative Principle, Sherlock Holmes

I N T R O D U C T I O N

Background

In United Kingdom television program, many entertainments related to film-making and roles present various kinds of forms such as movies, dramas, and TV series. One of the TV series produced by Sue Vertue in BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) is ‘Sherlock Holmes’, which was based on the most popular works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930). Sherlock Holmes as the main character in ‘Sherlock Holmes BBC Series’ is mentioned to be a consulting detective in London. This information may imply the audience that a detective likewise is typically a serious person who plays with facts and logic, thus nearly has no sense of humor. This fact is remain untrue since

there had been no proof to it. Under this circumstance, the author is attracted to observe Sherlock Holmes' utterances which contain humor.

The study focuses on the analysis of ambiguity which is hardly seen or understood by audience as humor. It investigates the ambiguity in Sherlock Holmes' utterances using the Cooperative Principle by Grice, saying that in a conversation, ones must cooperate by making a "contribution as required" in an appropriate "purpose or direction" (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Under this general principle, ambiguity violates Grice's maxims, as the sub maxims convey an idea to be informative, relevant, and/or avoid ambiguity (pp. 45-46). The violation happens when an utterance fails to conform these maxims.

To introduce ambiguity that violates Grice's maxims, ambiguity itself comes from the word ambi- that reflects an idea of "two", as it has two meanings. Philosophers of language and linguists define ambiguity as various acceptable interpretations to a different situation from many related events (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy online). Chrysippus (279-206 BC) assumed that every word is ambiguous, meaning that one person may interpret the same word with different meaning. In general, ambiguity can be understood as a situation or expression that has more than one meaning. Moreover, Chao and Xinghua (2013) differ ambiguity based on its negative and positive role. Negative ambiguity should be avoided as it intrudes communication, while positive ambiguity may be intentional and leads to irony, sarcasm, humor, etc.

One of the result of intentional ambiguity is humor. It seems to be difficult to find a "pre-theoretical definition" of humor (Attardo, 1994, p. 3), as it is many times assumed to be indescribable (Escarpit, 1960 cited in Attardo, 1994). Even laughter and humor are often used in the same context, whereas both are two different thing. Humor may create laughter, yet not all laughter is caused by humor, as well as not all humor provokes laughter. (Mulder and Nijholt, 2002). Linguists, psychologists, and anthropologists often refer humor as any category of situation or object that invites laughter, amusement, and considered to be funny (Attardo, 1994). In this context of study, humor can be categorized as any situation or utterance which is meant to be amusing or funny, thus potentially invites laughter.

To explicate the expert's perspective about humor, psychoanalyst Schoenewolf (2015) categorizes seven kinds of humor and their meanings, partly reflecting Freud's (1991) types of humor in his book *Jokes and the Unconscious*. They are malicious humor or a humor in which we laugh at someone we consider beneath us; giggles or a kind of humor which comes about when people find something so funny (often something trifling); jokes otherwise a humor which is breaking the rules of social censorship, also there is always some anger beneath them, provides us with a "guilty pleasure"; self-deprecating humor or a humor that comes by saying stupid things and thereby evokes laughter from others as well as from themselves; satire is a higher form

of humor which goal is to “hold the mirror to nature”; ingratiating laughter; a laughter of pleasing someone to get into their good graces; and healing humor, also called comic humor or a humor in which we are not laughing at somebody, yet with them.

Studying ambiguity can be interesting, partly because it is not immediately understandable. Even ones often do not realize when they say ambiguous utterances to others, which can lead to misunderstanding. What is more interesting, ambiguity can result humor which tends to be amusing and invite laughter. This series of complexity have led ambiguity in humor as an attractive object of study to learn and investigate.

A study about ambiguity related to humor has been done many times by some researchers, such as Chao (2013) who conducted a pragmatic study of ambiguity and puns in English humor. Using the pragmatic features such as the Deixis, Presupposition, and Cooperative Principle, he analyzed the ambiguity and puns from several sources of English humor, and found out that the humorous effects are achieved from ambiguity and puns.

Tang (2016) also conducted a study about the function of pragmatic ambiguity in English jokes. She analyzed some English jokes from various sources to find out the function and effects that can be achieved from pragmatic ambiguity. As a result, the pragmatic ambiguity in English jokes was assumed to have a recreational, social, aesthetic, emphasizing, and satirizing function.

The other study was conducted by Taghiyev (2017). He analyzed English humor based on the types of ambiguity, lexical-semantic and structural syntactic ambiguity; and the violation of manner and relevance maxims by Grice (1975). Using the example of English jokes from many sources to be analyzed, he provided an understanding on how the humorous effect is achieved based on the theories.

Above all, these researchers analyzed various English humors from random sources using the existed theories. In other words, the object of their studies is clearly meant to be humorous since somebody else had categorized it as ‘English humor’. While the present study is different because the researcher uses a particular literary work, specifically in a detective movie where serious conversation is mostly held. Moreover, the study intends to find out what and how ambiguities in the literary work violate Grice’s maxims to create humor. Hence, the primary questions are as follows:

1. What are the violated maxims found in Sherlock Holmes’ utterances that cause ambiguity to create humor?
2. How does Sherlock Holmes use the ambiguities as humor?

This study can contribute to both two levels of language use in humor; theory and practice. Theoretically, this paper gives further understanding on the use of ambiguities to create good humor in a literary work or conversation. Practically, it helps the audience to recognize and understand ambiguities or

even improve their creativity to produce similar kinds of jokes, thus makes them have better sense of humor.

Methodology

Based on the phenomena and the study questions above, the researcher attempts to answer them using qualitative approach. It is mostly implemented by “collecting textual data” and analyzing it with interpretive analysis (Heigham & Croker, 2009, p. 5). The data are taken from Sherlock Holmes’ utterances in his conversation with other characters in each season of ‘Sherlock Holmes BBC Series’.

To collect the data, first, the researcher watches every episode of the movie series with English subtitle from season one until four which consist of 13 episodes in total. Second, the researcher identifies Sherlock Holmes’ utterances in each season which were considered to be ambiguous. Third, the researcher screen-shoots the scenes in the movie series that potentially ambiguous or having multiple meanings, and categorizes them in a certain folder per season. By doing this, the data is expected to be organized and easily classified.

The data are first classified whether each ambiguous utterance is included as humor. The humor is decided based on the experts’ perspective, in which it is amusing or funny, and potentially invites laughter. The humorous ambiguity is then separated from the non-humorous one, to make sure the study will only discuss ambiguity as humor. In analyzing the ambiguity, the researcher uses the theory of Gricean maxims of Cooperative Principle, in which they are violated.

There are four maxims of Cooperative Principle by Grice (1975), each is with its sub-maxims.

(1) Quantity

- Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange)
- Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

(2) Quality

- Do not say what you believe to be false
- Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

(3) Relation

- Be relevant

(4) Manner

- Avoid obscurity expression
- Avoid ambiguity
- Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
- Be orderly

After analyzing violated maxims, there will be provided the possible meanings of the ambiguity as it has multiple meanings. To make sure the ambiguities contain humor, the researcher classifies the kind of humor in Sherlock's each utterances based on Scoenewolf's (2015) categorization. The theory is chosen as the appropriate one to explain the analysis. Therefore, the findings are expected to construct the meaning of ambiguous utterances as humor.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The findings below are the violated maxims found in Sherlock Holmes' utterances from each season which contain ambiguity as humor.

Season	Sherlock's utterances	Violated maxim
1	"Pointless. You'll never find him, but I know a man who can." "Me." (<i>The Great Game</i> , episode 3)	Maxim of quantity
	"Well, John. Really well. I mean, you missed almost everything of importance, but you know..." (<i>The Great Game</i> , episode 3)	Maxim of manner and maxim of relation
2	"You're right, Anderson, nothing. Except his shoe size, his height, his gait, his walking pace." (<i>The Reichenbach</i> , episode 3)	Maxim of quantity and maxim of relation
3	"Since it's unlikely we'll ever meet again, I might as well say it now. John, there's something I should say, I've meant to say always and I never have. Sherlock is actually a girl's name." (<i>His Last Vow</i> , episode 3)	Maxim of manner and maxim of quantity
Special	"This is my friend and colleague, Dr. Watson. You may speak freely in front of him, as he rarely understands a word." (<i>The Abominable Bride</i> , episode special)	Maxim of relation
4	"I am Sherlock Holmes." (<i>The Six Thatchers</i> , episode 1)	Maxim of relation

In the first season of Sherlock Holmes BBC, there found ambiguity in Sherlock's utterances that cause humor. Based on the quoted utterances, in the first season, ambiguity as humor occurs due to the violation of maxim of quantity, also the combination of maxim of manner and maxim of relation. While in the second season, the ambiguity found in Sherlock's utterance is caused by the violation of maxim of quantity and maxim of relation. Moreover, the ambiguity found in the third season is violating maxim of manner and maxim of quantity. In the fourth season, the ambiguity as humor occurs as the speaker violates maxim of relation. Last, it reappears Sherlock violated maxim of relation to create ambiguity as humor.

In this discussion, the researcher intentionally chose the utterance in each season of the movie series as evidences of ambiguities as humor in Sherlock's utterances.

Utterance 1:

Lestrade: "I'd better get my feelers out for this Golem character."

Sherlock: "Pointless. You'll never find him, but I know a man who can."

Lestrade: "Who?"

Sherlock: "Me."

(The Great Game, Sherlock Holmes BBC Series episode 3 of season 1.)

By saying "you'll never find him, but I know a man who can", Sherlock had implied Lestrade that he would find someone who could do the job. This is why Lestrade asked for confirmation in who the person was. He obviously expected someone (and not Sherlock) that he did not know where and who. However, Sherlock intentionally disappointed him by saying that the person was himself. By so doing, Sherlock had violated maxim of quantity which says "do not make your contribution more informative than is required" (Grice, 1975, p. 45) to trigger Lestrade asking who the person was. While he simply wanted to tell Lestrade that he could do the job and there is no need to find him because he was right there.

The ambiguity is noticed after Sherlock answered that himself is the person who refers to "a man" in the previous sentence. Before that, the "man" in his sentence referred to somebody else who could help Lestrade. It was successfully used by Sherlock to make Lestrade presumed that there was other person who could help him. Moreover, it was just another humor he used to make Lestrade asking "who", so he can answer "me" as a form of grandeur. This type of humor is categorized as a joke which contains "some anger" in his pride and "guilty pleasure" by deceiving Lestrade and answering "me" conceitedly.

Utterance 2:

John: (Explaining something) "...That's it. How did I do?"

Sherlock: "Well, John. Really well. I mean, you missed almost everything of importance, but you know..." (Explaining more detailed than John's)

(The Great Game, Sherlock Holmes BBC Series episode 3 of season 1.)

When Sherlock said he had done well, even really well, Sherlock continued his words that John missed almost all the important things. Missing all the important things was against the label well-explained, because when somebody explains really well, then they must have been very accurate and satisfying. Here the sentence might sound hazy whether Sherlock actually praised or humiliated John. This unclear statements became ambiguous as it violated maxims of manner which conveys a contribution to "avoid obscurity of expression".

Moreover, according to maxim of relation, one should contribute utterances to "be relevant" thus it does not confuse the addressee. Sherlock

praised John with irrelevant supporting sentence saying that he “missed almost everything of importance” which made the previous sentence of explaining “really well” meaningless. Therefore, I assume the earlier sentence was used as a humor only to amuse John. Otherwise, Sherlock would not continue telling that John missed many things, then give better explanation than him. This utterance is included as malicious humor due to make fun of someone who is beneath us.

Utterance 3:

Anderson: “That’s the end of it, we don’t know where they went from here. Tells us nothing after all.”

Sherlock: “You’re right, Anderson, nothing. Except his shoe size, his height, his gait, his walking pace.”

(The Reichenbach, Sherlock Holmes BBC Series episode 3 of season 2.)

An expression of agreement showed by Sherlock saying ‘you’re right Anderson, nothing’ was continued by several exceptions. According to Oxford (digital) dictionary, the word “nothing” means “no single thing” thus ideally explains none. Perhaps exceptions are okay, since it is less than two or three. Nonetheless, Sherlock provided many exceptions of “nothing” which cancelled the purpose of agreement. He violated maxim of quantity conveying not to give “more information than is required” because the point of his utterance was the disagreement (showed from his exceptions), thus the previous sentence should not be unnecessarily used. This also means violating the relevant maxim by telling a contrary supporting sentence which revokes the essence of “no single thing”.

The ambiguity occurs for the statements express both agreement and disagreement. The expression of agreement was not seriously used by Sherlock to share the same opinion as Anderson. In this context, it could be used as sarcasm by explicitly mentioning some facts of his disapproval. It also appeared to be humor targeting the person who he thought was beneath him, thus included as malicious humor.

Utterance 4:

Sherlock: “Since it’s unlikely we’ll ever meet again, I might as well say it now. John, there’s something I should say, I’ve meant to say always and I never have. Sherlock is actually a girl’s name.”

John: “It’s not.”

Sherlock: “It was worth to try.”

John: “We’re not naming our daughter after you.”

(His Last Vow, Sherlock Holmes BBC Series episode 3 of season 3.)

Sherlock's point was telling John that Sherlock was a girl's name. Yet the previous sentences were needlessly brought by Sherlock in a prolix speech. This made him violating maxim of manner which conveys to "be brief and avoid unnecessary prolixity". Moreover, he also violated maxim of quantity telling that he really wanted to say something to John, while directly said the point would not change the meaning of his main statement. Thus he had given more information than was required.

Furthermore, a long utterance is potentially ambiguous as it may emerge other possible meanings. In this case, the opening sentences used by Sherlock before saying the point that "Sherlock is actually a girl's name" is quite prolix. By using the expression "it's unlikely we'll ever meet again" and "I've meant to say always and I never had", Sherlock wanted to ensure John that he was going to say an important thing. "Sherlock is actually a girl's name" may literally be understood as an information. However, John realized Sherlock's intention that it was meant to give him a suggestion for his daughter's name, which was shown in his utterance afterwards "we're not naming our daughter after you". Therefore, the ambiguity occurred between its literal and inferential meaning.

In addition, the prolixity and ambiguity were intentionally used as humor. Sherlock told a stupid thing asking John to use his name for the daughter. This kind of humor which uses oneself as an object of the humor was included as self-depreciate humor.

Utterance 5:

Sherlock: "Good Afternoon, I am Sherlock Holmes. This is my friend and colleague, Dr. Watson. You may speak freely in front of him, as he rarely understands a word."

Watson: "Holmes!"

(The Abominable Bride, Sherlock Holmes BBC Series special episode.)

Speaking freely to somebody should refer to a person with privileged knowledge, because he will be capable to understand any utterances we speak. When the reason of asking someone to speak freely is because they rarely understood a word, then we can assume that the sentence is irrelevant and it has different purpose. Sherlock may violate the relevant maxim and create ambiguity of "speaking freely", as it no longer means discussing any topic that the speaker wants to know or both the speaker and the addressee already know thus they can share the same understanding. Yet the contrary, speaking freely here means speaking any words such as implicit ridicules or sarcasm as the addressee will not be angry because he does not understand anyway. This kind of utterances thus included as humor which targeting somebody who we think is beneath us, or we can say malicious humor.

Utterance 6

Mary: "No, I mean how did you find me?"

Sherlock: "I'm Sherlock Holmes."

(The Six Thatchers, Sherlock Holmes BBC Series episode 1 of season 4.)

I suppose the most relevant answer to "how" question is telling the process or the method of achieving something, and not telling who we are. Sherlock had violated maxim of relation by mentioning his name to Mary's how question. However, that did not mean Sherlock wanted to introduce himself to Mary. The expression of telling his name was probably assuming that Mary forgot who Sherlock was, that he was the great man who could do anything, and finding Mary was no doubt an easy thing. This supposition forms an ambiguous utterance. Moreover, Sherlock used the expression to show humor in the form of a joke with a "guilty pleasure" by proudly telling his name while Mary did not ask him to.

C O N C L U S I O N

Understanding humor can be as hard as creating it. Some humors are not considered to be entertaining or funny because they are only understood from one perspective. Though not all non-funny jokes are caused by non-ambiguous utterance, having other possible meanings will make an utterance be potentially humorous. This is one of the reason why studying ambiguity remains necessary.

The paper analyzes ambiguity in Sherlock Holmes' utterances which cause humor based on the violation of Grice's maxims. The result has shown that even humor can be found in serious situation in the form of ambiguity. Ambiguity in serious conversation mostly lets the audience to choose whether they want to rationalize it or laugh at it.

Ambiguity does not always come from the violation of maxim of manner which conveys a contribution not to be ambiguous. Moreover, it also appears due to the violation of maxim of quantity and maxim of relation. Too much or too little information may create other possible meanings as it is not supposed to provide the required information. While irrelevant utterance triggers many inferential meanings to interlocutors. It appears that Sherlock's utterances violated the maxims individually, for instance maxim of quantity and maxim of relation, otherwise the combination of maxim of manner and maxim of relation, and so on.

The three violation of Grice's maxims are often applied in ambiguous utterances. As in Sherlock Holmes' utterances, humorous ambiguity gains not only more attention, but also attraction to the audience and makes more entertainments in television programs worth to watch.

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