Humor Strategies in the American Sitcom “Friends”: An Empirical Study with Reference to Grice’s “Cooperative Principle”

Yu-wen Wu & Yong Chen
National Pingtung University of Education

ABSTRACT
This study aims to explore how American sitcom characters violate Grice’s Cooperative Principle as humor strategies in their daily conversation to create humor. Data were collected from a famous American sitcom Friends—Season 10, which described the relationships and the daily lives among six close friends in New York. The findings indicated that among all humor strategies resulting from the violation of the Cooperative Principle, the strategies of 1) irony, 2) responding irrelevant statements, and 3) making an excuse were the top three humor strategies most frequently used in the 10th season. It was also noted that the speakers would use different kinds of strategies to achieve their intended humorous effects since every type of humor strategy had its own designated function or purpose. This study concluded that humor can be either funny or cruel, so it is important for speakers to choose appropriate humor strategies to achieve their goals in the process of communication.

Keywords
humor, American sitcoms, Friends, pragmatic theories, Cooperative Principle, humor strategies
INTRODUCTION

According to Chomsky (2006), linguistic competence was an essential element for learners to acquire a language. Yet, some researchers (Bachman; as cited in Geoff, 2004; Canale & Swain, 1980) believed language learning should not focus on grammatical competence only; instead, they suggested that communicative competence is also an important element for language learning. Realizing the importance of communicative competence, Raskin (1985) proposed that the competence of humor should also play an important part in language learning. In addition, Carrell (1997) suggested that in order to comprehend humor, two kinds of competence, i.e. joke competence and humor competence, should be incorporated by interacting with each other. She further explained that joke competence should occur before the hearer can use his or her humor competence to judge whether the text was amusing or not. Therefore, from the views of Raskin and Carrell mentioned above, humor competence is closely related to communicative competence that cannot be ignored in our daily conversation.

In recent years, studies with respect to the relationships between humor and communication have been discussed by a number of researchers (Bell, 2007; Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2002). These researchers have stated that humor is a tool that can be used to enhance informal communication and relationships among interlocutors. In order to reach good communication among interlocutors, Grice (1975) suggested that speakers should obey the four cooperative maxims (i.e. the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation, and the maxim of manner) in the process of communication. However, several researchers claim that noticeably high percentage of humorous conversations is established with the violation of one or more of Grice’s maxims of Cooperative Principle (Attardo, 1994; Raskin, 1985). That is, speakers may violate the maxims of Cooperative Principle purposely in the process of conversation in order to arouse hearers’ laughter. This type of humor is usually observed in the interactions among friends, colleagues, or people who have known each other (Holmes & Marra, 2002).

As one of the highest rated American sitcoms broadcast from 1994 to 2004, a lot of vivid images from Friends somehow still linger in the audience’s minds until today. This sitcom revolves around the relationships and the situations among six friends (i.e. Chandler, Monica, Ross, Rachel, Phoebe, and Joey) in New York. These six characters have been close friends for 10 years and they always get together and chat about trivial things around daily lives in their apartment. As mentioned earlier, Holmes and Marra (2002) suggested that humor which resulted from the violation of cooperative maxims often occurs in the conversation among friends and colleagues; thus, the present study intends to analyze how these characters create humor by
violating the Cooperative Principle.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Pragmatic Theory**

**Cooperative Principle**

Grice (1975) suggested that communication is a process that requires interlocutors to be cooperative with each other, and he formalized the cooperative principle that guides speakers to make their contributions appropriate to the conversation. Based on the principle, four maxims were proposed by Grice:

I. The Maxim of Relation
   1) Be relevant.

II. The Maxim of Quality
   1) Try to make your contribution one that is true.
   2) Not to say things that are false or for which you lack adequate evidence.

III. The Maxim of Quantity
   1) Do not make your contribution more or less informative than required.

IV. The Maxim of Manner
   1) Avoid ambiguity and obscurity.
   2) Be brief and orderly.

These maxims specified the rules that speakers have to follow in order to make conversation go on effectively. Whenever one or more of these maxims is transgressed, the necessity of reconstructing the meaning of the utterance arises in order to save the utterance from merely being a faulty conversational contribution. For example, self-evidently true or obviously false statements must be uttered for some other purposes rather than for simply conveying their stated meanings. Several rhetorical strategies have been considered to flout Grice’s maxims: that is, metaphors, overstatements (exaggeration), understatements (euphemism), and sarcasm are regarded as examples of violating the maxim of quality or quantity. Notably, in the daily conversation when the speaker violates the maxim of quality by saying something untrue, the hearer, more often than not, may not be so sure whether the speaker’s statement is true; yet, in sitcoms the audience in front of television will have the least difficulty to judge if the speaker is telling the truth or not, because they usually can see the speaker’s exaggerated facial expression and meanwhile hear a burst of canned laughter.

**Relevance Theory**

Relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) is a proposal that seeks to explain the method of communication: i.e. implicit inferences. It argued that the human mind will instinctively react to an encoded message by considering information that it
conceives as being relevant to the message. In the relevance theory, every utterance given by speakers should be guaranteed as its own particular relevance. To understand an utterance is to prove its correlation to the current context. In order to prove the relevance of an utterance, the speaker has to consider the hearer’s cognitive abilities and the contextual resources (Sperber, Cara, & Girotto, 1995). When the propositional form has been elaborated by the speaker, the utterance will be a premise of a conversation. Then, the hearer will take the premise, along with other available non-linguistic premises as contextual resources, and try to figure out what are the most relevant messages being conveyed to him or her.

In a joke or a sitcom, the funny lines may result from the fact that what the hearer retrieves as the most relevant interpretation of the speaker’s utterance is different from the speaker’s intended meaning. That is, the hearer retrieves the literal meaning as the most relevant interpretation of the speaker’s utterance but the speaker means the non-literal implicature. The misunderstanding of the speaker’s implicature comes from the lack of the comprehending contextual resources on the part of the hearer in the course of a conversation. Sometimes the “funniness” in these lines is created by the communication breakdown while making conversation (i.e. the speaker intends to convey the literal meaning, but the hearer mistakes the non-literal meaning as the most relevant interpretation).

Cooperative Principle theory of humor

Not all humorous phenomena, of course, can be explained by the cooperative principle. Its limitations begin to emerge as the strategy of jokes is used extensively. First, the theory of cooperative principle is usually used to infer conversational implicatures. It is almost out of place when confronted with the joke that is not in conversational form. Second, even when we are dealing with the conversational jokes, the theory of cooperative principle is not so applicable to the jokes when humor is created by some other linguistic features. Thus, we should realize that the theory of cooperative principle is not capable of explaining all the humorous situations, though it is fairly important to the studies regarding the subject of humor.

Nonetheless, several linguists (Attardo, 1997; Norrick, 1993; Raskin, 1985) have been trying to make a general pragmatic explanation on humor with reference to Grice’s theory concerning conversational the cooperative principle and implicature. Raskin and Attardo (1991) claimed that humor, on the one hand, involves some degrees of violation of the cooperative principle, but, on the other hand, humor is also a cooperative act because it can convey information. Raskin (1985) suggested that joke-telling mode of communication is still governed by the cooperative principle because he believed that humor carries communicative functions.
Humor Theories

Incongruity-Resolution Theory

The incongruity-resolution theory is one of the most influential theories that have been discussed by several scholars (Shultz, 1976; Suls, 1972). It is a two-stage model of joke comprehension and appreciation comprising incongruity and resolution. Incongruity is usually defined as a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in a joke. It is a concept which accounts well for the most obvious structural features of jokes and the surprising parts of punch lines. The greater the discrepancy between the set-up and the punch line is, the more surprised the audience may feel. However, incongruity alone is not sufficient to explain the structure of humor (Shultz, 1976). Once the hearer of the joke senses the incongruity, he or she will be motivated to resolve the incongruity. Within the framework, the appreciation of humor is conceptualized as a biphasic sequence from discovering the incongruity to resolving the incongruity (Gulas & Weinberger, 2006; Ruch, 1992). Without a resolution, the hearer may feel puzzled or frustrated (Suls, 1972).

Superiority Theory

Superiority or disagreement theory is among the oldest theories of humor which can date back to Plato and Aristotle. This theory asserted that people laugh at the inferiority, stupidity, or misfortunes of the hearers so that they could feel superior to the hearers. In this theory, humor is the way to boost one’s ego or sense one’s self-worth; that is, laughter is an expression of sudden glory and a realization of being superior to someone else (Hobbes, cited from Berger, 1993; Feinberg, 1978). The laughter of glory is combined with mockery, ridicule, and laughter at the foolish actions of others as well as sympathy, congeniality, and empathy. In addition, laughter has been theorized as serving social functions in helping people identify with a group and solidify the social bonds within a group (Hugh, 1985). By laughing along with a joke to ridicule others, the person is sending a message that he or she belongs to the social group rather than the ridiculous group.

Relief Theory

Relief humor theory is based on the idea that humor is used to release tension and bring relaxation. According to the theory, emotional tension is built to deal with an upcoming social or psychological event. When the surge of energy is in excess of what is needed, the surplus is dispelled through laughter (Morreall, 1983). Again, Morreall (1983) believed that people may involve themselves in prohibited and suppressed thoughts and then liberate themselves by bursting out laughter. For example, horror movies sometimes create images of false terror: the creaking door turns out to be only that and nothing else. At such a moment, the tension is released, audience members will laugh. This theory also emphasizes the social and behavioral...
components of humor. In this case, humor may be used to rebel against repressive or uncontrollable elements of society (Shade, 1996). Thus, some people like to make jokes of a powerful group to release their tension because they are controlled by the group and often feel powerless when dealing with them.

**Semantic Script Theory**

Different from the incongruity-resolution humor theory related to the cognitive field, the semantic script theory, proposed by Raskin (1985), is the first linguistic treatment of verbal humor. The distinction between verbal and non-verbal humor lies in the fact that non-verbal humor refers to the situation in which humor occurs without a text. In sitcoms, humor sometimes arises from the characters’ exaggerated body gestures or facial expressions, and such kind of non-verbal humor falls beyond the scope of Raskin’s theory because it cannot be explained by a linguistic theory of humor (Attardo, 1994). Raskin’s model took the position that all humor involves a semantic-pragmatic process, and this process includes a semantic opposition between the scripts. Thus, the theory assumed that a joke is always related to two different scripts that are opposed to each other in a particular way, and the joke needs to satisfy two basic conditions: first, the text has to be compatible, fully or in part, with two different scripts; second, these two scripts show opposition in a special sense. The shift from one script evoked by the text of the joke to the other script is achieved by the semantic script switch trigger. A semantic script switch trigger introduces the second script and imposes a different interpretation of the joke. Consider the following example with a joke discussed in script-based humor.

‘Is the doctor at home?’ the patient asked in his bronchial whisper. ‘No,’ the doctor’s young and pretty wife whispered in reply. ‘Come right in.’

(Raskin, 1985:100)

The first part of this joke is saliently activated by the frame of a doctor-patient script. However, the reply of the doctor’s wife forces the readers to reinterpret the text in the different script (i.e. a script about adultery). Hence, the essential element for the occurrence of humor is the compatibility of the text with two opposed scripts (Brone & Feyaerts, 2003).

**THE STUDY**

**Data Collection**

As mentioned earlier, the major goal of this study is to explore the linguistic characteristics of humor in American sitcoms which are caused by the violation of Grice’s (1975) Cooperative Principle, and the data collected were from a famous American sitcom, *Friends*: Season Ten, which is the latest one in all the seasons. There are 18 episodes in the 10th season, but the writer only analyzed from 1 to 17
episodes because the last episode is the interviews of all the characters and the
directors. Judging whether a line is funny was based on the occurrence of canned
laughter in the characters’ conversations. In Shu’s (2007) thesis, she compared the
funny lines which were signaled by two native speakers of English with the
occurrence of canned laughter in this sitcom and found that the correlation between
the occurrence of canned laughter and funny lines pointed out by two English
speakers was 78%. Thus, the writers collected all the lines where canned laughter
occurred as the punch lines as the data to be analyzed in the study.

In analyzing the data, the four maxims of Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle:
i.e. the maxim of quality, the maxim of quantity, the maxim of relation, and the
maxim of manner were used to examine how the characters violated the cooperative
principle to evoke the audience’s laughter.

As for inter-rater reliability, the coefficient revealed an 80% inter-rater
agreement between two raters (i.e. two English-major graduate students) when one of
17 episodes in the 10th season of Friends, was selected randomly from the data as the
main source to be analyzed.

Analysis of the Violation of the Cooperative Principle

Within the four maxims of the cooperative principle, the violation of the maxim
of quality was the strategy most frequently used (42.62%). Second to the maxim of
quality, the funny lines resulted from the violation of the maxim of relation
contributed 32.79%. The maxim of the manner contributed 13.40%, and the maxim of
the quantity contributed 8.2%, which was the least. These results showed that the
violation of the maxim of the quality was the humor strategy that the characters
usually used in the 10th Season of Friends.

Under each maxim, there were different kinds of strategies that can explain why
the conversations going on were humorous. The writer found that the strategies of
irony (16.67%), of making an irrelevant statement (14.75%), and of finding an excuse
(13.11%) were the humor strategies most frequently used among all humor strategies
being employed. In the following paragraphs, the writer will introduce and categorize
all kinds of humor strategies that had been found in all 17 episodes. One or two
examples will also be given to illustrate each strategy.

Violating the Maxim of Quality:

Grice’s maxim of quality stated that speakers have to try to make their
conversational contribution correspond to the truth. In this study, four kinds of humor
strategies, i.e. irony, exaggeration, excuse, and pretending, were found in use by
violating this maxim. Note that in daily conversation, it is not easy for the hearer to
sense that the speaker is saying something that is completely opposite to his or her
true feelings; however, in a sitcom, the audience is much easier to sense the speaker’s
feelings by seeing the exaggerative facial expressions or noticing the occurrence of canned laughter.

Irony

Irony refers to the strategy that the speaker expresses something that is completely different from the literal meaning in order to make fun of or tease someone else.

Excerpt 1:  (S10, E9)

Ross was worrying about the date with a lady tomorrow because he did not know how to make himself look cool. Therefore, he was discussing with his friends about what to wear for the date.

Ross: Damn it! I have this date tomorrow night and I have to look cool.
Phoebe: Well, you know, if you want fashion help, Rachel and I am going shopping tomorrow. You are more than welcome to come to us, right?
Ross: Really? That would be great. I mean, I have to do something. She kind of teased me about how I dress.

→ Joey: I can see why. Nice shirt.

It is obvious that Joey did not really appreciate Ross’s shirt when he said “nice shirt.” It is because Ross told his friends that he had been criticized on the style of his dressing by that lady, and that it should be time for him to seek some comfort from his friends. Looking at Ross’s shirt scornfully, Joey told Ross that he understood the reason why that lady would make comments like that. However, the next utterance given by Joey was an appreciation of Ross’s shirt, and this even appeared to be an act of insincerely. As a matter of the fact, Joey’s admiration statement of Ross’s shirt was meant to tease Ross by implying that he did not have good sense of fashion. Thus, the comment “nice shirt” said by Joey is an ironical expression to ridicule Ross’s sense of fashion.

Excerpt 2:  (S10, E5)

Chandler and Monica were asking Rachel if she could help them to write a recommendation letter to the adoption agency. They did not ask Joey to do this for them because they did not expect that Joey could do it well.

(Joey looked at them, disappointed about their decision)

Monica: Yeah, it's just we don't think of you as really being so much "with the words".

Joey: Whoo-weh hey weh-hey whoo hey!!

→ Monica: Clearly we were wrong.

Joey: I gotta a lot of nice stuff to say about you guys, ok? And I know how much you wanna have a baby, you know, and I would love to help you get one.

Monica: You know what? Then, Joey, we want you to do it.
Joey: Thank you! Alright, let me see how I'm gonna start... "Dear baby adoption decider people..."

→ Chandler: So excited about your letter!

Both Chandler and Monica understood that writing a formal recommendation letter was beyond Joey’s capability, so they did not intend to ask him to do this from the very beginning; yet, in order not to let Joey down, Chandler and Monica accepted Joey’s help, but they still believed that Joey was not strong in doing that. What Joey said next had confirmed their belief, but Chandler still said that he was excited to see Joey’s recommendation letter. It is obvious to see that what Chandler said was different from what he really thought. This ironical statement was used to tease Joey for he was really not good at expressing himself in any way.

_**Exaggeration**_

Exaggeration refers to way that the speaker overstates the features, defects, or the strangeness of someone or something.

**Excerpt 3: (S10, E7)**

> Phoebe, Mike, Ross, and Chandler were discussing how much money was needed to have a wedding.

Mike: I heard that weddings are like a 40 billion dollar a year industry.

→ Ross: Yeah, and I'm responsible for just like half of that.

Mike told them that there was about 40 billion dollars that people spent on weddings per year, and Ross replied that his contribution to weddings was almost half of 40 billion dollars. It is apparently that Ross did not spend nearly 20 billion dollars on his weddings for three times, but he said this in an exaggerated way to claim that these three weddings in his life did cost him a great deal of money.

**Excerpt 4: (S10, E7)**

> Ross intended to take Emma to the playground, but Rachel had a traumatic swing accident when she was young. She did not want Ross to take Emma to play on the swing, so she was trying to tell Ross how terrible the swing was.

→ Rachel: Ross, those things go like 40 miles an hour! Ok? When you're... and there is that moment when you are at the top, when you just don't know if you're gonna return back to earth!

Ross: Space is filled with orbiting children. (pause).

Obviously, Rachel tried to describe exaggeratedly about how unsafe those swings were to persuade Ross not to take Emma to the playground. It might be a little dangerous when sitting on the swing, but there is no way that people will leave the earth when the swing is at the top. Therefore, Rachel’s description about swings was too exaggerated to be accepted.

Excuse
The speaker makes up an excuse in order to solve problems or avoid others’ accusations in an embarrassing situation.

**Excerpt 5: (S10, E6)**

*Phoebe promised Monica to give her a painting which she made by herself. In fact, Monica did not want that painting at all. When Rachel found Monica would get that, she sarcastically said that she was jealous about Monica since Rachel did not want that painting either.*

Phoebe: Oh, I didn't know you wanted her too!

Monica: Huh!

→ Rachel: Well, I mean, sure, of course. But... you already gave that to Monica, so...

Monica: You know, I would give her up, for you.

Rachel did not want to tell Phoebe the truth that she disliked that painting, so she was trying to think of an excuse to avoid getting that painting. The incongruity comes from the discrepancy between Rachel’s lying and her real feelings. This incongruity can be resolved when the audience found that Rachel was making an excuse to let the chance of getting that painting slip way unnoticeably. It was the process between incongruity and resolution that evoked the audience’s laughter.

**Violating the Maxim of Quantity**

Grice’s Maxim of Quantity suggested speakers should not make their contributions more or less informative than they are required.

**Too much unnecessary information**

**Excerpt 6: (S10, E5):**

*Rachel was trying to use her experience to persuade her sister Amy not to marry the man who was not her true love.*

Rachel: Oh... sit down, sit down. Oh, honey, you know, I once also almost married somebody that I didn’t love. Do you remember Barry?

→ Amy: Hump, remember him? How we used to make out all the time after you went to sleep.

Rachel: Sometimes just nodding is ok.

Rachel was worrying that her sister, Amy, would marry someone that she did not love, so she used her own experiences to persuade Amy to reconsider her decision. When Rachel used her ex-boyfriend as an example, she wanted to make sure whether Amy could remember him. In fact, Amy could just give Rachel a simple response with yes or no; however, her further explanation seemed redundant and even unnecessary under that circumstance. This was why Rachel wanted to suggest Amy that sometimes nodding would be a response much good enough.

**Less informative response**
Excerpt 7: (S10, E5)

Rachel’s sister Amy told Rachel she was going to get married with Myron. Rachel wanted to get more information about Amy’s fiancé.

Rachel: No, what’s he like?

Amy: Oh! He’s ok.

Rachel wanted to realize more about her sister’s fiancé because she believed the man was not her sister’s Mr. Right. Obviously, Amy did not care what his fiancé was like; actually, she only cared about how fancy her fiancé’s department was. Therefore, when Rachel asked Amy about her fiancé, she was not aware that she should describe more about her husband rather than about the fancy department she would get after getting married with Myron.

Violate the Maxim of Relation

Grice’s maxim of relation requires the speaker to say something relevant to the context. In the sitcom Friends, three kinds of humor strategies violating the maxim of relation were employed, including irrelevant statements, icebreaker, and changing the topic.

Irrelevant statements

Speakers may make some irrelevant comments in order to refuse to answer some embarrassing questions.

Excerpt 8: (S10, E1)

Monica just came back from the hairdressing salon. She was so excited and satisfied about her new hair style, but her friends did not think so.

Monica: What do you think?

→ Chandler: I think…. I think I can see your scalp.

Monica: Don't you just love it?

→ Ross: Ye... Yeah... Yeah... You got shellfish in your head.

When Monica asked her friends’ opinions about her new hair style, she expected to hear some good comments because she herself liked it very much. Her friends did not feel the same, and, as a matter of fact, they thought that Monica’s hair style was rather weird. Nonetheless, they did not want to tell Monica the truth, so they gave Monica some irrelevant answers when she asked their opinions. Their responses did not match what Monica asked for, but this kind of response was relatively safer as compared with the consequences if they just went ahead and boldly told her the truth.

Icebreaker

Sometimes people will say something that is irrelevant to the current context so as to avoid silent and awkward moments being produced between or among interlocutors.
Chandler and Monica were talking to their adoption social worker, Laura, in their apartment. On the other hand, they were trying to keep Joey away from their apartment because they did not want Laura to find that Joey was their friend.

Laura: Is he alright out there by himself?
Chandler: Oh yeah! He has a caretaker. His older brother... Ernie.
Laura: Bert and Ernie!
Chandler: (nervous smile) You can't make this stuff up!
(silence)
→ Chandler: Bert and Ernie had a big yellow bird!

Laura was confused about Chandler and Monica’s response and their neighbors’ names, i.e. Bert and Ernie, which were the same with the characters’ names in a popular TV show Sesame Street. Chandler explained that he did not make up the names for their neighbors. However, Chandler’s explanation did not make the embarrassing situation become better because Laura was still curious and kept digging in. Everyone turned silent. In order to break the silence, Chandler said something that was totally irrelevant to the context at that moment. By using this strategy, Chandler intended to divert Laura’s attention from the previous speech context; in addition, he also tried to use this strategy to reduce the tension that made them feel embarrassed.

**Changing the topic**

Speakers may change the topic of the conversation in order to divert attention from the current situation or to show they are not interested in the previous topics.

**Excerpt 10 (S10, E 9):**

Chandler and Monica were saying goodbye to their friends before going to the adoption interview in Ohio. Their friends were very excited about this, but Chandler and Monica were trying to tell them about the difficulties they may experience during the process of adoption.

Chandler: Yeah. I mean, this girl could decide against adoption or she could like another couple better.

→ Phoebe: What are you gonna name the baby?

Chandler: I can develop a condition in which I talk and talk and no one hears a word.

Monica and Chandler were telling their friends that they were not getting what they hoped for by adopting a baby, because they knew there may be a lot of difficulties in the process of adoption. Apparently, Phoebe did not pay any attention to what Chandler had said about how difficult the process would be, and she just kept asking some questions irrelevant to the topic that they were discussing.

**Violating the Maxim of Manner**
According to Grice’s maxim of manner, an utterance must be briefly, orderly, and unambiguously. Humor that results from ambiguous utterances can also help explain Raskin’s (1985) semantic script theory of humor. Based on Raskin’s theory, for a joke to be funny it must include at least two scripts which are compatible with the text and are opposite in a special sense. The shift from one script to another is achieved by the semantic script switch trigger which introduces the second script and imposes a different interpretation to the text of the joke.

**Lexical ambiguity**

Lexical ambiguity refers to an individual lexical item which expresses more than one meaning. For instance, the word *bank* both means the *financial institution* and the *riverbank*. The speaker attempts to use this strategy on purpose to make fun of the hearer or to lead the hearer to interpret the messages in a wrong way.

**Excerpt 11: (S10, E4)**

Rachel bought a cake for celebrating her daughter’s one-year-old birthday, but the cake seemed not to be the one that she had ordered. She called back to that bakery to explain that this was not what she wanted.

- **Rachel:** (speaking to the person on the phone again) Yes, yes. I still want my daughter’s picture, but on a bunny cake. Yellow cake, chocolate frosting with nuts!

→ **Chandler:** To be fair, this one does have nuts.

Rachel asked the bakery to make a cake which shaped like a bunny with her daughter’s picture on it. When she opened the box, she found her daughter’s picture was not on the bunny cake; instead, her daughter’s picture was on the cake which shaped like a man’s penis. She called the bakery and asked them to give her a new cake that had chocolate frosting with nuts, but Chandler told Rachel that this cake did have nuts on it. The nuts that Rachel wanted were something like peanuts, but the nuts that Chandler meant were man’s testicles. The two opposite and compatible scripts were the critical elements that made the conversation sound funny.

**Referential ambiguity**

Referential ambiguity refers to a sentence or a phrase where the referent is not clear. This type of ambiguity will make the hearer confused about what the speaker really refers to at that moment.

**Excerpt 12: (S10, E9)**

Phoebe was talking to a woman at the door of the coffee house. Rachel asked Joey if he knew the woman who was talking to Phoebe.

- **Rachel:** (to Joey) Hey, who’s Phoebe with?

→ **Joey:** Should I say Mike?

- **Rachel:** No, I say the woman who is talking to Phoebe at the door.
**Joey:** I'm gonna say someone I'm gonna have sex with.

The question that Rachel asked was ambiguous because she did not provide adequate information to help the hearer interpret her question. Rachel’s question could refer to the woman whom Phoebe was talking to at the door, but it could also refer to Phoebe’s boyfriend. Therefore, it made Joey a little confused because he believed Rachel should know who Phoebe’s boyfriend was. To make the question more clearly, Rachel could offer more information about the location to help Joey identify the person that Rachel intended to know.

**Excerpt 13: (S10, E 6)**

*Chandler had promised Joey that he would watch his video tape, but Joey found that Chandler did not do it. Joey was very upset about Chandler’s lies, and he was going to explain why he knew Chandler did not watch the tape.*

**Without brief utterances**

People sometimes do not talk in an orderly way because they are eager to explain something or accuse someone of what he did before.

**Chandler:** Yes, and I have to say, I am not just hurt. I am insulted. When I tell somebody I did something...

→ **Joey:** Ok whoah-hey... Let me just stop you right there, ok? First, you lied, right? **Then** you lied about lying, ok? **Then** you lied about lying about lying, ok? So before you lie about lying about talking about lying about... lying... (loses count and begins to count the number of 'lying' in the air but gives up.) (yelling) Stop lying!

From Joey’s utterances, it is obvious that he was very angry and intended to accuse Chandler of telling a lie to him. At the beginning, Joey wanted to clearly and peacefully explain why he knew Chandler had lied, but he lost his patience and wanted to force Chandler to admit what he had done before. Therefore, he could not deliver his utterances in a brief way, and as a result of that, his argument became a little bit out of focus or even senseless.

**DISCUSSION**

The results and analyses above showed that close relationships between humor and the violation of Grice’s cooperative principle do in fact exist (Raskin & Attardo, 1991). It was found that a lot of funny lines could result from certain or the incorporation of different kinds of humor strategies which violated Grice’s principle. Among all of the humor strategies in the 10th season, the strategy most frequently used was that of irony. According to Holmes and Marra (2002), subversive humor like irony occurs frequently among co-workers and close friends in informal situations. Since most of the conversations in Friends took place among six close
friends under casual circumstances like drinking together or chatting in their shared apartment, the subversive humor like irony mentioned above is expected to occur frequently. In *Friends*, the characters tended to say something that was in contrast to they really thought in order to tease or show their disagreement to the hearer’s opinions, and it was also the moment to arouse the audience to have a good laugh since it was funny. Notably, this kind of humor can also be explained by reference to the superiority theory of humor when the speaker tries to make fun of or tease the hearer. Like the excerpt 2, Chandler used an ironical tone to show his expectation about Joey’s letter, humor would occur when the audience realized that Joey was in an inferior status when talking to Chandler. This kind of strategy is also frequently used in daily conversation to tease someone else, but sometimes this behavior may be too cruel to arouse laughter.

Another humor strategy often used in *Friends* can be observed in the situations when the speaker responded something irrelevant to the previous speaker’s utterances. In Grice’s maxim of relation, the speaker is supposed to say something that is related to what the previous speaker said. However, the characters in *Friends* often used this strategy to avoid answering some embarrassing questions. In the excerpt 8, Chandler and Ross were expected to answer if they liked or disliked Monica’s hair style, but they gave their answers irrelevant to the question to avoid honestly responding to Monica’s question. In *Friends*, the characters often used this strategy because they did not want to answer some questions that would probably make the person or persons involved embarrassed. Thus, the reason why Chandler and Ross gave their responses to Monica’s question in that way was that they did not want to make her feel awkward if they told the truth.

Making an excuse was also a humor strategy frequently used in *Friends*. In daily conversation, sometimes the speakers may make excuses in hopes of cheating the hearer to avoid the potential confrontation, but very likely it still somehow will irritate the hearer. Nonetheless, making excuses often becomes the humorous materials to arouse the audience’s laughter in *Friends*. In *Friends*, the characters usually made excuses in order to cheat others or avoid being blamed by others. The audience could feel funny when they found what the character said was a lame excuse; in addition, the character’s unavoidable embarrassment was also a point to make the audience laugh. This kind of humor can also be accounted for with the relief theory. Just like what in the excerpt 6 demonstrated, there existed the tension between Rachel and Phoebe when Phoebe thought Rachel also wanted to get that painting, but it was relieved when Rachel finally made up an excuse to tone down the tension. Thus, when the audience found the would-be crisis just passed in such an easy way, laughter was aroused.
CONCLUSION

The present study analyzed the humor strategies that were used in the 10th season of Friends. Based on Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle, it is found that the “funniness” embedded in the funny lines was mostly created by the violation of Grice’s principle. It is also found that the characters would use different kinds of humor strategies which violated the cooperative principle to amuse the audience. Among all the humor strategies, the strategy of irony was the one most frequently used. The characters intended to say something that was exactly opposite to their true intension in order to make fun of or tease the hearer. When the audience began to notice the discrepancy between the speakers’ utterances and real feelings, the effects of humor were thus created. Responding with something irrelevant and making an excuse were also the techniques frequently used as humor strategies in Friends. The characters would use these two strategies to avoid being put in an awkward situation to answer some embarrassing questions.

In daily conversation, humor can also be produced by different kinds of humor strategies. However, it may not be easy for interlocutors to feel the existence of humor when the speaker says something that violates Grice’s principle because any conversation is originally done as an act to reach communication. As for the audience, they are not directly involved in the actual conversation with the characters, so it would be easier for them to detect the characters’ purposes of saying something that violates the cooperative principle; thus, when the audience notices the characters’ intentions, the effects of humor are thus created. Humor may be an important vehicle to reduce the embarrassment among interlocutors, but it may also be a cruel tool at the expense of others though it was probably just meant to be funny originally. Therefore, how to use humor wisely in a conversation to achieve communicative purpose would be an important issue for speakers to think about while conducting conversation with one another.

This study, as mentioned before, is merely a primary analysis in the field of humor in sitcoms, and it has some limitations inherently. Here, the writers would point out what would be the possible limitations, and, meanwhile, would like to make some suggestions for further studies related to this subject: first, this study only analyzed the funny lines in the 10th season of Friends, and hence the writer would suggest that researchers in the future may use different types of sitcoms with various topics to see whether all the findings in question are conclusive or not. Second, this study was limited in its linguistic scope for it basically ignored all the non-linguistic triggers such as body language, cultural and social influence, and the personal traits of the speakers and the hearers. Finally, since the definition of “being funny” is an
abstract and subjective issue, future research may work out a systematic groundwork
to analyze what kinds of strategies can be more appropriately defined as humor
strategies.

References
Gruyter.
Bell, N. D. (2007). Humor comprehension: Lessons learned from cross-cultural
367-278.
Brone, G., & Feyaerts, K. (2003). The cognitive linguistics of incongruity resolution:
Marked-reference point structures in humor. K.U. Leuven: Department of
Linguistics Preprint nr. 205. 58pp.
second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics* 1, 1-47.
Press.
Geoff, J. (2004). *Theory construction in second language acquisition*. Amsterdam:
Benjamins Publishing Company.
analysis*. NY: M E Sharpe Inc.
Holmes, J., & Marra, M. (2002). Over the edge? Subversive humor between
Press.
Indiana University Press.


