

What a Joke: Humor Generated by Conversational Maxim Violations in *Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar...*

Sungguh Lucu: Humor yang Dihasilkan oleh Pelanggaran Maksim Percakapan dalam Plato dan seekor Platipus Berjalan ke Bar...

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ABSTRAK

Abstract

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana ketidakpatuhan terhadap maksim, khususnya *infringement*, digunakan untuk membuat lelucon. Pendapat Grice tentang ketidakpatuhan terhadap maksim digunakan untuk menganalisis pelanggaran yang biasa terjadi dalam lelucon. Data dalam penelitian ini berupa teks-teks berupa lelucon, sedangkan sumber datanya adalah kumpulan lelucon yang diambil dari karya *Plato dan A Platypus Walk to A Bar...* Peneliti menggunakan analisis dokumen untuk mengumpulkan data yang diperlukan. Sedangkan untuk mencapai keabsahan data, penelitian menggunakan triangulasi sumber data dengan menyediakan sumber data yang bervariasi untuk mencapai kompleksitas tujuan penelitian. Terakhir, untuk menganalisis data, penelitian ini menggunakan rumusan Miles dan Huberman yang terdiri dari reduksi data, penyajian data, penarikan kesimpulan dan verifikasi. Hasil penelitian menemukan dua puluh lima data lelucon yang melibatkan penggunaan pelanggaran sebagai teknik untuk menciptakan humor. Seluruh data diklasifikasikan ke dalam pelanggaran kesantunan bahasa dan budaya dan tidak ada yang dikategorikan sebagai pelanggaran kognitif. Lelucon dalam buku ini disajikan melalui tiga tahapan, yaitu *premise*, *setup*, dan *punchline*. *Infringement* selalu digunakan dalam tahap *punchline* untuk menciptakan kejutan dan situasi lucu. Temuan ini menjadi dasar penelitian berikutnya, khususnya terkait lelucon yang dihasilkan dari *maxim violation* pada genre-genre lain seperti *stand-up comedy*, *podcast*, *sitcom*, atau ulasan produk.

Abstract

The present study aimed to analyze how violations of maxim were used to create jokes. Grice's notion of violation of maxims was used to analyze typical violation involved in jokes. The data in this study were in the form of texts comprising jokes. The data source was from

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compilation of jokes in Thomas Wilson Cathcart and Daniel Martin Klein's Plato and A Platypus Walk into A Bar... book. The researchers applied a document analysis as a technique to collect the data. Meanwhile, in order to achieve validity of the data, the study used triangulation of data sources by providing varied data sources to achieve the complexity of the research objectives. Finally, to analyze the data, the present study employed Miles and Huberman's formulation consisting of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification. The study found twenty-five data of jokes involving the use of violations as techniques to create humor. All data were classified into violations of language and culture and none categorized as cognitive violation. The jokes in this book were presented through three stages, namely premise, setup, and punchline. The violations here were employed in the punchline to create plot twist and humorous situation. These findings could serve as a foundation for future studies, particularly regarding jokes resulted from maxim violations in other genres such as a stand-up comedy, podcast, sitcom, or product review.

1. Introduction

Humor is a social phenomenon signifying how language is used and communicated in society for various purposes, one of which, as stated by Holmes & Marra (2002), is a medium to build relationships between speakers and interlocutors. Berger (1976) adds that humor is presented in a specific way to create incongruent response or meaning and thus causes hearers to smile or laugh. As humor has been part of human communication for ages, it attracts academia to discuss humor from diverse fields of study. Specifically, one of the well-known theories divides humor into three categories: superiority, relief, and incongruity. The first theory deals with the feelings of being superior over other persons or situations. Meanwhile, the second theory, relief, maintains that humor is used to release someone's pressure, nervousness, or tension through laughter (Raskin, 1979). Finally, incongruity highlights the matter of surprise, meaning that humor is established out of a conflict between what is expected and what happens.

Regarding the third theory, incongruity is commonly used in humor, where speakers set up expectations for hearers and then surprise them with something they never expected. This often appears in the form of language ambiguity, which deliberately misleads the hearers, followed by a punchline as a surprise (Ross, 2005). More importantly, incongruity-based humor is created by presenting two conflicting situations: a certain idea which people have in mind and how another idea twists it. Sometimes, incongruity is presented by someone incapable of maintaining the conversational flows due to impairment. Thomas (2013) classifies impairment into linguistic performance and cognitive impairment. The former may occur because someone has an imperfect comprehension of the language, such as kids or foreign learners. In contrast, the latter comprises any situation aside from someone's language performance, such as excitement, drunkenness, nervousness, or fear.

Under the pragmatic study, incongruent humor can be best explained by Grice's (1975) cooperative principle. Grice's cooperative principle maintains that for conversations to run effectively, the speakers and interlocutors must observe four maxims, including the maxim of quantity, quality, relation, and manner. However, there is a condition where the speakers may not observe the maxims deliberately or

accidentally in the conversation; one of the purposes of this is to create humor. Thomas (2013) proposes five ways of failing to observe Grice's maxims, namely: 1) Flouting: to blatantly fail to observe the maxim without any intention to mislead the hearers but to generate an implicature; 2) Violating: to deliberately fail to observe the maxim with the intention to mislead the hearer; 3) Opting out: to be unwilling to cooperate and withdrawing from the interaction; 4) Infringing: to unintentionally fail to observe a maxim due to limited language capabilities and understanding; and 5) Suspending: to force speakers not to observe a maxim because of certain circumstances, i.e. cultural specification.

Several previous studies investigated humor from the view of Grice's cooperative principle/non-observance of maxims. Chaipreukkul (2013) and Xue & Hei (2017) used Grice's non-observance of the maxims to analyze humor in *Home with Kids* and *Big Bang Theory* sitcoms. The results revealed that flouting the maxims was among the strategies for generating humor. Meanwhile, Alawiyyah et al. (2020) investigated humor in academic lectures. They discovered that lecturers relied on flouting the maxims of quality to create humor. However, violating the maxim is also widely used in humor. Rochmawati (2012), Caesilia (2015), and Amianna & Putranti (2017) emphasized that the most critical way to fail Grice's maxims to generate humor was by violating the maxims. Based on previous studies, research about failing to observe maxims circumnavigates around flouting and violating. Hence, the novelty of the present study lies in the use of infringing maxims to create humor. This area will also be the gap left by previously mentioned studies. For this reason, the current study aims to bridge the gap by focusing on analyzing the use of infringement to generate humor in *Plato and A Platypus Walk into A Bar...*

Literature Review

Humor seen from a pragmatic view

As briefly mentioned above, humor is utterances conveyed by someone to be amusing or considered amusing by others. Besides, Holmes (2000) argues that humor is not merely whether such utterances are funny. However, it may involve broader purposes, including social functions. In other words, humor is delivered to build solidarity, maintain friendship, and show identities (Hoa, 2017) or as a means of criticism (Petraki & Ramayanti, 2018). Further, most humor is typically formed by generating "bits" or lines that involve a premise, setup, and punchline. In a shorter version, it can only go with interconnecting setup and punchline. To build a comedy premise, the setup is essential to reveal or describe the situation, either briefly or at length. Finally, after the context of the line is presented and expectation is created in the setup, a comedian twists the lines as a surprising punchline. The example 1) is presented below to make it clear.

- 1) Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He's not breathing, and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his cell phone and calls 911.
"I think my friend is dead!" he yells. "What can I do?"
The operator says, "Calm down. First, let's make sure he's dead."

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There's a silence, then a shot. Back on the phone, the guy says, "OK, now what?" (pause for laughter?)

The narrative premise above establishes that two hunters are hunting in the woods. The tension is generated when his friend collapses. The bit of tension is even escalated when the collapsed friend is not breathing, and his eyes are glazed. The setup begins when the operator asks the man to calm down and ensure that his friend is dead. After hearing the operator's order, the hearer expects the man to do what the operator asks. However, the punchline emerges to twist the lines unexpectedly and playfully by doing the opposite act. Instead of checking his vitals for a pulse in case his friend is still alive, the man misunderstands what the operator asks: "Let's make sure he's dead," as in, "If he's not dead yet, make him dead." Further, the humorous situation above is created through non-cooperative interaction between interlocutors, thus causing language impairment. The non-cooperative interaction happens because the man misunderstands the operator's order and does not observe the cooperative principle as proposed by Grice.

Grice (1989) claims that communication is a reciprocal process where interlocutors must cooperate. He then coined cooperative principles to ensure that interlocutors make decent contributions to the conversation. The cooperative principles serve as guidelines for the efficient and effective use of language. The guidelines, as proposed by Grice, consist of four maxims of conversation, including the maxim of quantity, the maxim of quality, the maxim of relation, the maxim of relation, and the maxim of manner. Finally, by saying principle, it is: "making a contribution as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or directions of the talk exchange in which people are engaged," adds Grice (1989:26).

In the maxim of quantity, the speakers must contribute as much information as needed and not provide too much or too little information. In addition, the maxim quality requires the speakers to say what is believed to be the truth with sufficient evidence. The third maxim, relation, asks the speakers to say something relevant to what has been conveyed. Lastly, the maxim of manner suggests that the interlocutors must be brief, orderly, and avoid obscurity and ambiguity. Each conversation participant must observe these four maxims so the communication runs smoothly and well. However, sometimes, there will be occasions where the interlocutors are unlikely to observe those four maxims for various reasons. Grice was well aware and thus proposed five situations where the speakers failed to observe the maxims comprising flouting, violating, opting out, suspending, and infringing a maxim.

Flouting a maxim happens when someone blatantly disobeys a maxim with the conscious intention of creating implied responses. By saying that, the speaker assumes that the hearer can seek another meaning different from what is expressed. As opposed, violating a maxim occurs when the speaker blatantly fails to observe the maxim on purpose to generate misunderstanding or any other objectives from the interlocutor. However, there is a time when someone, specifically a journalist in this case, chooses not to obey the maxim due to ethical or legal issues. The journalist opts out of a maxim by refusing to reveal the name of someone involved in an alleged criminal case before being declared guilty by a jury's verdict. Meanwhile, in suspending a maxim, the speaker does not observe the maxim for culture-specific reasons, one of which is to avoid taboo words. Finally, infringing a maxim is the inability of the speaker to respond to someone's utterance properly due to language impairment. Thomas

(1995) asserts that someone infringes a maxim due to two causes, namely linguistic or cognitive impairment. Linguistic impairment occurs when someone has slightly poor language proficiency, for example, children, foreign language learners, etc. Conversely, another constraint happens when someone's cognitive is impaired in some way, maybe because of drunkenness, nervousness, or excitement, thus causing him to be incapable of speaking clearly and to the point.

2. Method

The research design in this study was descriptive qualitative as the objective is to investigate how maxim violation is used to create humor. As suggested by Cresswell, (2014), qualitative research aims to explore and comprehend the phenomenon of a human or social group in which the data are elicited through certain techniques and the meanings are interpreted by the researcher. In this study, the researcher became the main instrument as he managed the activities such as reading, selecting, finding, writing, and categorizing the jokes that constitute infringing a maxim.

Moreover, the source of data is where research data is obtained. The research data source is not only limited to places but can also include informants, events, documents, sites, and others. Based on this notion, the current data source is jokes taken from Thomas Wilson Cathcart and Daniel Martin Klein's *Plato and A Platypus Walk into A Bar...* book. Meanwhile, the data in this research is in the form of texts comprising violations used as a strategy to generate humor. The researcher applied a document analysis as a technique to collect the data. The document analysis was carried out by reading, taking notes, and collecting data from textual data sources (Santosa, 2021). In order to achieve validity of the data, the study employed triangulation of data sources by providing varied data sources to achieve the complexity of the research objectives. To analyze the data, the present study employed Miles and Huberman's formulation (1994) consisting of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification.

3. Findings and Discussions

The current study discovered twenty-five data of typical jokes comprising maxim violations to generate humor. All data were classified into two primary types of violations: cognitive and linguistic violations or violations of language and cultural performance (Prasojo et al., n.d.). As highlighted in the previous chapter, cognitive violation is likely because the speaker feels nervous, excited, shy, or drunk. This may cause a hindrance for someone to speak clearly, orderly, and to the point. However, the impairment of language performance occurs when the speaker, by chance, fails to observe a maxim because of language barriers, including language proficiency, comprehension, cultural gaps, or others. Based on what the researcher found, the results proves that all twenty-five data are firmly classified into the impairment of language performance, and zero data are categorized as cognitive impairment. More detailed examples and explanations are presented below.

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- 2) There's this pilot flying happily along in his plane, right? when suddenly one of his engines catches fire. He looks out of the window and all he can see is the fire. Wow! Terrible. He shouts 'mayday! mayday!' into his radio, you know, to ask for help. Right, so a voice on the radio goes,
ATC operator: *This is the control tower. Please state your height and your position.*
Pilot: *I'm about 1.70m and I'm sitting down.*

The normal moment or premise of the short story 2) establishes that a happy pilot is flying along in the aircraft. The first bit of tension is generated when the aircraft's engine is broken down. As the pilot is aware of the danger, he directly communicates with the air traffic control (ATC) operator by saying "mayday! mayday!" as a distress, emergency signal in voice-procedure radio communications. Meanwhile, the setup is that soon after the ATC operator recognizes the level of emergency, he asks the pilot's altitude to determine the pilot's position relative to the ground, other planes, and obstacles. The hearer expects the pilot's response to be the height in feet or meters above sea level as in 30,000 feet. However, the punchline twists the hearer's expectation that the pilot misunderstands height, as in "How tall are you?" and position, as in "Are you sitting or standing?". Another example containing infringement is presented below.

- 3) Doctor, doctor. I keep seeing green hairy monsters with horrible faces.
Doctor: *Have you seen a psychologist?*
Patient: *No, just green hairy monsters with horrible faces.*

The premise, or normal moment, establishes that a patient sees the doctor. The tension is created when the patient regularly sees the monsters with scary faces. Then, the setup is generated when the doctor asks whether the patient has visited a psychologist as a medical professional for a consultation or treatment. The hearer expects the patient to say "yes" if he has seen a psychologist and "no" if he has not. The punchline releases tension when the patient misunderstands the doctor's question as in "Other than green hairy monsters with horrible faces, have you also seen a psychologist in your hallucinations?"

- 4) Every morning, Emily steps out onto her front stoop and exclaims, "Let this house be safe from tigers!" Then she goes back inside.
Finally, her neighbor said to her, "What's that all about? There isn't a tiger within a thousand miles of here."
And she said, "See? It works!"

The normal moment or premise establishes that Emily does regular activities to make her house safe from tigers by stepping out the door and shouting her spell. The setup is created when the neighbor asks the purpose of Emily's ritual and assures that the tiger lives a thousand miles away from the residential area. The hearer expects Emily to believe the fact and never do the ritual anymore. However, the punchline twists the expectation when Emily fails to understand her neighbor's utterance and assumes that the residential area is free from the tiger because of her consistent ritual, as highlighted in her response, "See? It works!".

- 5) A multinational corporation advertises for a secretary. Rebecca applies for the job, passes the typing test, and is granted an interview. The human-resources manager asks, “Do you speak any foreign languages?” And Rebecca says, “Meow.”

The joke above starts with the premise that a secretary position is sought. The setup tells that as Rebecca applied for the job, passed the test, and managed to be interviewed, the manager aimed to know whether or not she spoke more than one language. The hearer expects Rebecca to tell names of foreign languages (e.g., Japanese or French) or say “no” if she does not speak any foreign languages. Here, the punchline emerges to twist the lines in an unexpected and playful way by using animal language or vocalization: “Meow.” The non-cooperative interaction happened because Rebecca misunderstood the HR manager’s question and did not observe the cooperative principle as Grice proposed.

- 6) A guy walks into a crowded bar and announces that he’s got a terrific Polish joke to tell. But before he can start, the barkeep says, “Hold it right there, buddy. I’m Polish.” And the guy says, “Okay, I’ll tell it very, very slowly.”

The normal moment or premise is that a guy is entering the bar and aiming to tell a joke about Polish people. The setup is created when a bartender is originally from Poland, asking the guy to hold the joke. The hearer expects that since the Polish man is in the bar, the guy will never tell the joke as it will offend the man. However, the punchline breaks the hearer’s expectation by showing an opposite plot. The guy fails to observe the cooperative principle as he misunderstands the Polish’s statement as in “Hold it, buddy. I’m Polish, and I’m the right person to hear your terrific joke.”

- 7) A bear walked into a bar one day. The people hid under the tables. They were afraid. “Barman!” said the bear, “I’d like to order a glass of orange juice.” Everyone watched as the bear drank. When the glass was empty, the bear put it on the table. The barman said to the bear, “We don’t get many bears in this bar.” The bear asked, “How much is the orange juice?” “Two dollars.” replied the barman. “Well,” said the bear, “at two dollars a glass, I’m not surprised!” Then he got off his chair and walked out the door.

The premise of the story above is established when a bear enters a bar. The tension is generated when the bar guests are afraid and hide under the tables. The setup is built when the bartender says it is uncommon to see bears ordering the drink in his bar. The hearer will agree with the bartender as humans and bears do not live in the same place. However, the punchline gives a surprising twist. Many bears do not go to that bar, not because humans and bears have different habitats. However, it is

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because the drink in that bar is overpriced, as emphasized in “at two dollars a glass, I'm not surprised!”

- 8) Waiter! Your fingers are in my soup.
Don't worry, Madam. It's not hot

The premise here is that a lady orders soup in a restaurant. In the setup, the lady reminds the waiter as his fingers touch the soup while serving it. From this conversation, the hearer expects that after the waiter is aware of the situation, he will quickly remove his fingers from the soup because it is against hygiene. Nevertheless, the line is twisted unexpectedly, and the waiter's understanding of the lady's reminder is impaired. Instead of removing his fingers, he does not mind having fingers in soup because the soup is not hot.

3.1 The Humor Structure

As seen from the examples analyzed above, it is robust that all jokes are presented in similar patterns and stages, namely, premise followed by setup and punchline. The premise is the topic, issue, idea or theme of a problem discussed in the narrative. Based on the premise, the setup functions as an initial story where the hearer will imagine what we say. Finally, the punchline is the funniest part of a joke. The punchline, a response to a description or setup previously delivered, is where the hearer's expectations are twisted with a surprising line. To make it clear, the joke stages used in *Plato and A Platypus Walk into A Bar...* is presented in the following picture.



Picture 1. The Joke Stages in *Plato and A Platypus Walk into A Bar...*

Further, in line with the cooperative principle, the infringement is used as a technique to present a punchline. In the punchline, the man or woman is characterized by someone who cannot fully understand the interlocutor's utterance. The final twist appears in the form of infringement, showing that someone fails to observe the maxims and misunderstands others' meaning or purposes, thus causing impairment of language. As opposed, data classified as cognitive impairment is not found in this study. The plausible reason is that it consists of a collection of jokes, not characters narrated in a long story. The jokes in the book only tell a short story involving a few lines with various premises or topics.

4. Conclusion

The present study discusses how violation of maxims can create various typical jokes in humor. Grice in Thomas (1995) asserts that there are five situations where the speakers fail to observe the maxims including flouting, violating, opting out, suspending, and infringing a maxim. As numerous studies have discussed the use of flouting and violating as techniques in creating humor, the present study analyzed

infringement-containing humor in *Plato and A Platypus Walk into A Bar...* In this study, the researcher classifies infringement into two types, namely cognitive impairment and impairment of language performance and culture-specific. The study found twenty-five data of jokes using violation as techniques to create humor. Surprisingly, all data are classified into violation of language performance and culture. In addition, all data consistently used three stages to bring humor to the hearer, namely premise, setup, and punchline. In line with this, all data of maxim violations are found in the stage of punchline. This seems logical as the punchline involves a surprising plot twist, the use of violation may fit well in this case. These results serve as the foundation for future studies, especially when it comes to jokes generated by maxim violations in other genres including a stand-up comedy, podcast, sitcom, or product review.

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