



# An Analysis of the Black Humor in *Catch-22* Based on the Pragmatic Theory

Lili Li

School of Foreign Languages, Guizhou Normal University, Guiyang, China

Email: 2604672394@qq.com

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## Abstract

Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is one of the most representative works of American absurd novel. In his novel, Heller profiles the cold, strange and unexplainable American society. People are unable to realize a successful communication. Absurdity is the theme of *Catch-22*. The theme of absurdity is not only exposed in novel's content, but especially in the use of the language of the novel. This paper is going to reveal the absurdity and meaninglessness theme by means of employing Grice's cooperative principle and pragmatic presupposition, reference/deixis.

## Subject Areas

Literature

## Keywords

*Catch-22*, Black Humor, Cooperative Principles (CP), Presupposition, Deixis

## 1. Introduction

In the middle of the 20th century, after suffering from World War II, the Korean War, McCarthyism, and the Rosenberg death penalty, a large number of Americans had lost much hope for the reality of Western society. For Americans at that time, the world is absurd, human life is painful, and neither the God nor man, neither in theology nor in philosophy has any way of explaining the existing condition of the human kind. In the face of this crisis in the spiritual world, the traditional naturalistic and realist methods of novel creation were feeble and weak. The reader is accustomed to the ugliness and absurdity of society, and is in urgent need of a new creative technique. Thus the American absurd novel was born at the right moment. Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is one of the most repre-

sentative works of American novels of absurdity. One of the distinguishing features of this novel is the interweaving of tragedy, violence, and comic, resulting in a general impression of both humorous and terrifying. Heller evaluates the old writing traditions from a whole new perspective, which makes the reader resonate with the absurd world. In this irrational world, language is no longer a tool for communication and expression of thinking, but rather it makes the communication more confusing. The language of *Catch-22* is itself a representation of the absurd and crazy world, making the novel plot lifelike and unexpected. Heller's extensive use of contradictory, vague, extremely complex, and repetitive sentences in the novel, to achieve a strong pathological and humorous effect, deepening the sense of logic loss and panic in the world. This kind of humor is horrifying, yet it is an effective way to understanding the writing skills, so as to prob into its profound theme.

When *Catch-22* was firstly published, there was criticism, focusing on the structure, theme, characters, language and black humor. For it has deviated far from the style of the traditional ones. "An Impolite Interview with Joseph Heller" was published in 1962, with its first sentence "Has *Catch-22* been banned anywhere?" (Heller, 1962) [1]. Jan Solomon argued that the form of *Catch-22* was well designed to support the theme of absurdity, in fact to create its own dimension of absurdity (Solomon, 2008) [2]. Tomas Allen Nelson probed the theme of the novel mainly analyzed the theme of moral responsibility in *Catch-22* (Nelson, 2008) [3]. As for linguistic perspective, Laura Hidago Dowing explored it from logical, grammatical and semantic features of negation (Dowing, 2003) [4]. On black humor, Daniel Green points out the implicit dichotomy between the comic and serious (Green, 2008) [5]. He Tian analyzed the rhetoric devices of *Catch-22* from Conceptual Integration Theory (He, 2010) [6].

## 2. The Violation of the Cooperative Principles

Just as words can be regarded as various acts of speech, the conversations can also be seen as the exchanges of actions rather than just words. Grice believes that for, people's normal language communication is not a combination of unrelated words, but the speakers cooperate with each other. The two sides of the dialogue have a common purpose, at least a direction of mutual acceptance. Thus, both of them must follow a principle, which makes sure their words meet the other's need. Grice describes this principle as "cooperative principle (CP)". According to Grice, there are four maxims of cooperative principle: Quantity Maxim; Quality Maxim; Relation Maxim; Manner Maxim. Quantity: 1) make your contribution as informative as it required for the current purpose of the exchange; 2) do not make your contribution more informative than it required. It refers to the appropriate amount of information according to the purpose being communicated, too much or insufficient are inappropriate. Quality: try to make your contribution one that is true 1) do not say what you believe to be false; 2) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. It means that your

conversation should be true, more specifically: don't say what you think is untrue; don't say anything without sufficient evidence. Relation: be relevant. It means that your conversation should be relative to what you are communicating with. Manner: be perspicuous. 1) Avoid obscurity of expression; 2) avoid ambiguity; 3) be brief; 4) be orderly. It means that it should be clearly expressed. To be specific, it means that the ambiguity in the expression should be avoided. Avoid the ambiguity, to be concise and orderly. But in practice, people usually do not always follow these rules in their conversations. But the principles are often adjusted; and if the conversation is not conducted according to the details of the principles, the listener will think that the principles are not broken as they appear, but observed at a deeper level, so that he must infer what the speaker's intention is. This speculation Grice calls it the conversation meaning. He distinguishes two conversation meanings: one stems from the simple speculation that the speaker follows the code, and the other is more complex, based on whether the speaker violates or uses the code. The latter is exactly what this paper is going to explore. This part aims to analyze the dialogues of *Catch-22* by theory of CP and its related maxims to find how black humor is created by the violation of CP.

### 2.1. The Violation of the "Quantity Maxim"

The violation of the quantity maxim happens when either the provided information is more or less than the speaker needed. Look at the example.

- 1) "Who was it?" asked General Peckem.  
 "I don't know," Colonel Cargill replied.  
 "What did he want?"  
 "I don't know".  
 "Well, what did he say?"  
 "T.S.Eliot," Colonel Cargill informed him.  
 "What's that?"  
 "T.S.Eliot," Colonel Cargill repeated. (P. 41)  
 "Just T.S."  
 "Yes, Sir. That's all he said. Just 'T.S.Eliot.'"

This is the conversation between General Peckem and Colonel Cargill. Obviously, when they learned "T.S.Eliot" from Wintergreen, they had no idea what the words stand for. When General Peckem asked Colonel Cargill "What's that?" General Peckem was expecting to hear an exact definition and description about the words that he was perplexed. However, Colonel Cargill just repeated the old information. As a result, Colonel Cargill's given information was insufficient for General Peckem. In the conversation, Colonel Cargill failed to provide the information as required, which is regarded as the violation of quantity maxim.

- 2) "Yossarian, Sir", Lieutenant Scheisskopf said.

*“Yes, Yossarian. That’s right. Yossarian. Yossarian? Is that his name? Yossarian? What the hell kind of a name in Yossarian?”*

*Lieutenant Scheisskopf had the fact at his figure tips. “It’s Yossarian’s name, Sir,” he explained.*

During the trial for Clevinger, the colonel asked Lieutenant Scheisskopf the guy’s name next to Clevinger. From the colonel’s response, he was showing how he disliked the wired name. So, there was no need to repeat the name. On the contrary, Lieutenant Scheisskopf thought himself wise answered the colonel’s question with gallantry. However, his answer didn’t include any information. Lieutenant Scheisskopf is a total idiot. It is the idiot who becomes the general.

This kind of meaningless and containing nothing conversation is quiet obvious during the trial. Look at the following example:

3) *“You are a windy son of a bitch, aren’t you?”*

*“No, Sir”*

*“No, Sir? Are you calling me a goddam liar?”*

*“Oh, no, sir.”*

*“Then, you are a windy son of a bitch, aren’t you?”*

*“No, sir.” (P. 89)*

This is an endless conversation. The members of the committee felt it was their duty to prove Clevinger’s guilt, an act of patriotism. If he was not guilty, he would not be prosecuted. So the committee, in the name of maintaining order, keeps talking nonsense to prove Clevinger’s guilt. Not to mention that there is no justice, and even normal communication becomes impossible. The failure of the interaction between people in the novel means the collapse of the social order.

## 2.2. The Violation of the “Quality Maxim”

Quality maxim has two principles: 1) do not say what you believe to be false; 2) do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. However, in conversation, people don’t always observe it. The violation of the quality maxim often causes the rhetoric effects of metaphor, irony, satire, exaggeration (Li Ping, 2005) [7]. The reason why *Catch-22* has achieved such great literary achievement is closely related to its unique ironic artistic technique. In *Catch-22*, Heller uses irony to show the absurdity of Western society to people. The author treats accidents and misfortunes with restrained statements, and describes abnormal things as normal, so that the unthinkable becomes reasonable, and makes indifferent jokes to these phenomena (Duan, 2008) [8]. Heller also uses seemingly illogical language and events to reveal the absurdity behind the high logic, so that the tragicomic factors form a huge tension in the work. It can be said that irony is the most important artistic technique in *Catch-22*. Look at the following example:

4) *“Is Orr crazy?”*

*“He sure is”, Doc Daneeka said.*

“Can you ground him?”

“I sure can. But first he has to ask me to. That’s part of the rule.”

“Then why doesn’t he ask you to?”

“Because he is crazy,” Doc Daneeka said. “He has to be crazy to keep flying combat missions after all the close calls he’s had. Sure. I can ground Orr. But first he has to ask me to.”

“That’s all he has to do to be grounded?”

“That’s all. Let him ask me.”

“And then you can ground him.”

“No. Then I can’t ground him.” (PP. 51-52)

Doc Daneeka, the only one who could ground the soldier. So, Yossarian asked Doc Daneeka to ground him. But Doc Daneeka couldn’t ground him because he was not crazy. According to the above conversation, the readers believe Orr was crazy, so Doc Daneeka could ground the crazy soldier as he said. On the contrary, he could ground any crazy soldier while no one could be grounded. Because there was a *catch*. According to *Catch-22*, anyone who wants to get out of the combat duty isn’t really crazy. Orr was crazy and could be grounded. All he had to do was ask; and as soon as he did, he would no longer be crazy and had to fly more missions. Orr would be crazy to fly more missions and sane if he didn’t, but if he was sane he had to fly them. There was only one *catch* and that was *Catch-22*, which specified that a concern for one’s own safety in the face of dangers that were real and immediate was the process of a rational mind (Heller, 1961) [9]. In the conversation, Doc Daneeka said he could ground Orr which he believed to be false. Actually, he couldn’t ground anyone. *Catch-22* is the firstly mentioned in this book and has left a deep impression on the readers. It is the violation of quality maxim that causes the irony effect. Look at the other example:

5) “It’s meningitis,” he called out emphatically, waving the others back.

“Although Lord knows there’s not the slightest reason for thinking so.”

“Then why pick meningitis?” inquired a major with a suave chuckle. “Why not, Let’s say, acute nephritis?”

“Because I’m a meningitis man, that’s why, and not an acute-nephritis man,” ... (p. 205)

The soldier who saw everything twice was diagnosed as meningitis. There was not the slightest reason for thinking so. The only reason for picking meningitis was just because the colonel specialized in meningitis himself, so, the patients he diagnosed must have meningitis. Now that the colonel was the expertise at the meningitis, he must can tell that it was not the meningitis that caused the soldier saw everything twice. He was lying. In the end, the doctors were all in accord. They have no idea what was wrong with the soldier who saw everything twice. Finally, they rolled him away into a room, and quarantined everyone else in the ward for fourteen days. Therefore, through hiding the truth purposely and the

violation of the quality maxim, the impotence and absurdity of the colonel and other medical staff are easy to see.

One of the most typical features of the novel is the massive use of the paradoxical statement. A paradoxical statement is a text in which the language is inconsistent, illogical, or even subversive. In fact, it can also be said that this is a kind of linguistic paradox. This paradox makes some sense at first sight, but in fact it is contradictory. It often plays a humorous and ironic effect in expression, causing people to think deeply. Heller not only uses a logistically confused plot to represent a state of mental confusion, but also uses a unique linguistic technique, the self-contradictory statement, to fuse the theme and structure of the novel into perfect harmony. In his novel to enhance the effect of black humor, which is aimed at strengthening people's sense of panic in this world without logic. He often alternates words so that the words in the same sentence are the opposite of each other, creating a plethora of inexplicably contradictory statements.

### 2.3. The Violation of the "Relation Maxim"

The relation maxim refers to that your conversation must be relative to what you are communicating with. Your words should be relevant to the topic. Look at the conversation between Yossarian and Luciana:

- 6) *"All right, I'll dance with you," she said before Yossarian could even speak. "But I won't let you sleep with me."*  
*"Who asked you?" Yossarian asked her.*  
*"You don't want to sleep with me?" she exclaimed with surprise.*  
*"I don't want to dance with you". (P. 176)*

Yossarian fell in love with Luciana. From the conversation, it was clear that both of them were trying to avoid answering the other's questions directly and frequently changed their topic instead. For example, Luciana didn't answer Yossarian's question. Actually, she didn't have to answer, because it was not counted as a question. So, in order to save her face and let the communication continue, Luciana swiftly changed her topic and put up with another question for Yossarian. Similarly, Yossarian didn't give the answer Luciana asked. The conversation was then back to the starting point. The violation of relation maxim leads to the failure of the meaningfulness of the communication. By that, Heller manages to picture people's sense of impotence at that time.

### 2.4. The Violation of "Manner Maxim"

The manner maxim has four basic rules: 1) avoid obscurity of expression; 2) avoid ambiguity; 3) be brief; 4) be orderly. It means that it should be clearly expressed. To be specific, it means that the ambiguity in the expression should be avoided. Avoid the ambiguity, to be concise and orderly.

If people look closely at Heller's unique way of representing the absurd, they

will find that there is another technique employed in the novel, and that is echo. At various points in the novel there are words, phrases or sentences that are completely superfluous and meaningless, as if they were merely echoes of the previous ones. In example 1), the echoes of “T.S. Eliot” used in the conversation between General Peckem and Colonel Cargill bring to light the ignorance and the waste of life of the upper class. In the second example, the echoes of “Yossarian” prove the Lieutenant Scheisskopf’s stupidity. By using a lot of repeated sentences and complex sentences, Heller deliberately created a lot of vague language to confuse the readers, so as to picture the social background and people’s living situation and mental conditions at that time. It is obvious that almost every example in this paper is the evidence of Heller’s violation of the manner maxim.

In words, the phenomenon of violation of CP is full of the novel. The phenomenon of “violation” just constitutes one of the main language characteristics of the black humor. Novelists usually follow certain principles, which include in a sense of proper verbal behavior and conversation principles, so that the reader can correctly understand and appreciate their work. Heller violated these principles in his own creation. As a result, it inevitably gives the reader a sense of uncertainty, absurdity and a sense of black humor.

### 3. Black Humor Created by Reference/Deixis and Pragmatic Presupposition

Apart from the violation of CP, the black humor is also created by reference and pragmatic presupposition.

#### 3.1. Black Humor Created by Reference/Deixis

In pragmatics, it is this peculiarity that makes language correspond to the real world around it and thus has rich meanings. However, reference relation is not always one-to-one correspondence, nor is it static and immovable. Apart from the specific context, its meaning or meaning will be uncertain. Thus, reference mainly involves the relationship between language and context. This refers to the fact that language can fluctuate up and down around the actual information or meaning it wants to convey in a specific context, but it will not be completely divorced from this reality. When the language with referential meaning is inconsistent or even contradictory with the information or meaning in the real context, it will inevitably lead to the generation of hedges. Check out the following example:

7) *“Now, where were we? Read me back the last line.”*

*“Read me back the last line,” read back the corporal who could take short-hand.*

*“Not my last line, stupid!” the colonel shouted. Somebody else’s.*

*“Read me back the last line,” read back the corporal.*

*“That’s my last line again!” shrieked the colonel, turning purple with anger.*

*“Oh, no, sir,” corrected the corporal. “That’s my last line. I read it to you just a moment ago.”*

*“Oh, my God! Read me back his last line, stupid. Say, what the hell’s your name, anyway?” (P. 90)*

The definite article “the” should have a definite meaning, but in this dialogue it is uncertain. It is impossible to determine whether the definite article “the” means “yours”, “mine”, or “his” in the conversation. Different understanding will lead to different response and execution of instructions. So the original signification of the definite article is blurred here. By the way, the receiver has no idea that “last word” means the last word before the colonel speaks, or the last word after he speaks. By playing language games with readers, the author reveals the uncertainty of the meaning of language: the meaning of language changes with the change of time. Even in a moment, the meanings of the words can be completely different. This uncertainty brings the readers amusement. When deixis is not properly used, the reference is vague or the context is not clear, the information referred to is not clear. The meaning will become vague and inexplicable, resulting in communication barriers, causing misunderstanding, and this misunderstanding often leads to humor (Huang, 2010) [10]. In the black humor works, readers can find out that not only is language itself uncertain, but also the objectivity reflected by language is uncertain. Heller successfully conveys that language itself is uncertain and the objectivity reflected by language is uncertain either.

### 3.2. Black Humor Created by Pragmatic Presupposition

Presupposition in linguistics refers to a kind of hypothesis contained in the utterance without being explicitly stated by the speaker, which is a special implicative relation and a prerequisite for the establishment of the sentence. In communication, pragmatic presupposition is ubiquitous. It is not only a special kind of linguistic presupposition, but also a kind of intercommunication strategy. Look at another example: Yossarian wondered if Luciana would marry him.

8) *“You’re crazy.”*

*“Why am I crazy?”*

*“Because I can’t marry you.”*

*“Why can’t you marry me?”*

*“Because I am not a virgin.”*

*“What has that got to do with it?”*

*“Who will marry me? No one wants a girl who is not a virgin.”*

*“I will, I will marry you.”*

*“You’re crazy.”*

*“Why am I crazy?”*

*... (P. 183)*

In this conversation, Yossarian and Luciana get into the trap of cycling be-



tween “crazy”, “marry” and “not marry”, unable to communicate normally. Luciana is a whore. For Luciana, nobody wants to marry a woman who has lost her virginity. So, she stands on the presupposition that no one will marry her. Whatever the cause of her loss of the virginity, the proposition that “no one wants a girl who is not a virgin” is not valid, because the fact is that Yossarian wants her. Luciana started from a wrong logic and drew a wrong conclusion, so that the facts in front of her could not make her realize the wrong logic, so her thinking can only go on an infinite cycle in this strange circle of logic. Heller is implying that people in contemporary society are bound by a “weird circle” of one buckle after another, and they depend on each other and perjure each other. It is not the individual being, but the whole organic system.

Heller successfully makes use of readers’ presupposition and cognitive context to make the black humor effect. Check out with these examples:

9) *Netely had a bad start. He came from a good family* (P. 13)

10) *It takes brains not to make money.* (P. 40)

11) *Dunbar loved shooting skeet because he hated every minute of it and the time passed so slowly.* (P. 43)

12) *It was good when Hungry Joe looked bad and terrible when Hungry Joe looked good* (P. 61)

13) *People who met him were always impressed by how unimpressive he was.* (P. 95)

When the syntax starts, the receiver begins to interpret the meaning and presuppose the next view based on the former information, cognitive context and the common background knowledge. According to people common background knowledge, Netely has a bad start because he came from a bad family; a person with no brain can’t earn money; Dunbar loved shooting skeet so it was impossible that he hated every minute of it and the time passed so slowly; it was good when Hungry Joe looked good and terrible when Hungry Joe looked bad; people wouldn’t be impressed by any unimpressive person. According to their different positions in the cognitive process, pragmatic presupposition can be divided into typical and atypical. The “typical” and “atypical” is what most people agree and acknowledge (Wang, 2009) [11]. In *Catch-22*, the atypical presuppositions are well designed by Heller, which bring a great effect of black humor. These statements ought to be appeared and written in the book as readers expected and presupposed. However, the self-contradictory statements are the result of the unrealized presupposition, which causes the readers firstly surprised, confused, entertained, later become impotent, lost and horrified.

By using the illogic and self-contradictory language, Heller profiled the absurdity of the American society. *Catch-22* is a representative work of the black humor, which reflects the contemporary social problems in the United States and shows the powerlessness, hopelessness and helplessness of individuals in this world. The relationship between man and the world is absurd, and reason and language, as tools of human thinking and expression, pale in social reality. In

postmodern works, language is no longer a direct reflection of reality, but a fiction of reality. However, although black humor works fictionalize reality, they use its way of expression to allude to reality. The language game of dark humor is a hint and symbol of the absurdity of war, religion and the disastrous life brought about by high technology. In black humor novels, the text does not aim to reflect the objective truth, and the text becomes a language game. This kind of game, like a distorting mirror, into the mirror one can not find the entity but cannot leave the mirror of reality (You, 2006) [12].

#### 4. Conclusion

As a master of postmodernism literature, Heller did not give up the reflection of real life. Although his works did not directly reflect reality, his creation was indeed based on reality. Through the surface of black humor, people can still strongly feel the absurdity of the works and the heavy and helpless existence under the oppression of the alien forces, which shows the author's great attention and concern for the future and destiny of human beings. This paper has studied the creation of the black humor based on the pragmatic theories. The result shows that the black humor in *Catch-22* is created by reference, presupposition and the violation of CP. The novel theme of absurdity is enhanced by the black humor.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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