

# An Analysis of Humor Discourse in *Friends* from the Perspective of the Cooperative Principle

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## Abstract

In this article, a descriptive qualitative study with the pragmatic approach of the cooperative principle by Grice (1975, 2002) was conducted to investigate fundamental characteristics that generate comedy in the sitcom *Friends* by analyzing the dialogue of the main characters in the comedy. The findings of the research revealed that comedy achieved effects of humor by violating the maxims of the cooperative principle, i.e. quality, quantity, relation, and manner. This study might serve as a reference for future research in pragmatics, especially in the line of research from the cooperative principle perspective.

## Keywords

The Cooperative Principle, The Quality Maxim, The Quantity Maxim, The Relation Maxim, The Manner Maxim, Humor, Sitcom

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## 1. Introduction

Problems in life and workplace competition induce pressure or anxiety. Due to covid-19 pandemic and limited job opportunities in mainland China, for instance, a large number of undergraduate graduates choose to increase their competitiveness in the job market through graduate degrees, causing the number of applicants for master's degrees to reach 4.75 million in 2022, while the acceptance rate in mainland universities is only 24% and the acceptance rate of graduate students in the top 10 universities is even less than 10% (<https://www.163.com/dy/article/GSKTUDB70552D82Q.html>). This certainly puts a tremendous deal of stress on the lives of regular young people. Humor may help to alleviate this negative emotion (Gelkopf, 2011). Humor refers to a verbal and/or visual stimulus that spontaneously triggers laughter from the listener or viewer

(Wardoyo, 2015). Humor is prevailing in sitcoms, funny programs in which each episode normally presents an unexpectedly humorous event (Sherman, 2003). In order to comprehend the amusing occurrences in a sitcom, it is essential to comprehend the discourse. Grice (1975, 2002) proposed that effective communication is accomplished when the speakers adhere to the cooperative principle, also known as the four types of maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. However, if the four maxims are flouted, misunderstanding that leads to comedy will occur (Grice, 2002). Therefore, the present study investigates methods of violation of four maxims by analyzing the discourse that induces laughter in the renowned sitcom *Friends*, aiming at revealing underlying patterns that sitcoms manufacture humor. And then, there may be an opportunity to make a modest contribution to narrow the distinction between an academic theory and a type of popular culture: to show how Grice's cooperative principle could be opened up to sitcoms and how popular culture could profit from the analysis of Grice's four maxims.

The impact of violation of the cooperative principle on humor has been examined by many researchers (e.g. Kehinde, 2016; Ariefandi, 2018; Huang, 2020; Seth, 2021; Maulida, Rozi, & Pratama, 2022). Some enlightening results have been reported to enhance the comprehension of the development of comical humor. However, two issues have emerged from the literature. First, little attention has been paid to the qualitative analysis of the violation of maxims. Second, how the methods engender humorous impact deserves a more thorough analysis. In the present study, I will address these two issues by exploring the effects of violation of Grice's maxims on humorous discourse.

## 2. Literature Review

The cooperative principle and its four pragmatic maxims are introduced first. Grice (2002) proposed the theory of the cooperative principle and its associated maxims. Grice believes that a set of rules must be followed for a conversation to be effective, economical, and fruitful. He claimed that participants in a conversation would be expected to make contributions as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged.

The Cooperative Principle includes four maxims, 1) quantity maxim, 2) quality maxim, 3) relation maxim, and 4) manner maxim. Quality maxim is at its highest when a speaker provides appropriate information, neither more nor less. When a speaker must express the truth, the quality maxim is of the utmost importance. When a speaker brings up a relevant issue or topic for discussion, the speaker's relation maxim increases. Finally, the manner maxim is used when a speaker has to convey himself clearly and without ambiguity.

When communicating with one another, Grice believes that all of the aforementioned maxims must be observed. In addition, there will be no implication in their communication, as both parties will communicate what they mean in a straightforward and true manner; they will not misunderstand one another.

However, it is a truth that individuals do not always observe the maxims in conversation. On occasion, people intentionally breach the maxims to make fun of others. Grice (2002) proposed four approaches to violation of aforementioned maxims. First, a speaker may subtly and unobtrusively violate a maxim; if so, in some cases he or she will be accountable for deception. Second, a speaker may make it plain that he or she is unwilling to cooperate in the way a certain maxim requires. Third, a speaker may encounter a conflict: it is hard to simultaneously be succinct and explain clearly. Fourth, a speaker may flout a maxim; that is, he or she may blatantly fail to fulfill it.

Several researches have been undertaken on the subject of humor or Grice's maxims. Kehinde (2016) undertook a pragmatic study of humor in *A Night of a Thousand Laughs* in Nigeria, exploring how Grice's maxims are violated and dismissed by the Nigerian comic. A research by Ariefandi (2018) investigated humorous activities that have an impact on readers of *Amazing Daioh Volume 1* by Azuma Kiyohiko. The research revealed types of the flouting of the cooperative principle that embeds funny effects in the manga. However, non-native Nigerian speakers or Non-native Japanese speakers may have difficulty in perceiving the humor in the selected article content. Seth (2021) analyzed Ghanaian English comedy *Nurse Awuni* from a pragmatic standpoint by employing two theories: the cooperation principle and relevance. These ideas, according to Seth (2021), are effective for generating comedy in sitcoms. Huang (2020) analyzed the verbal humor in the sitcom *Two Broken Girls* from the perspectives of conversational implicature and cooperative principle. Huang (2020) concluded that combination of the two perspectives constitutes a more powerful explanation than either one of the theories alone. However, these two articles did not address Grice's four maxims independently in depth. Maulida, Rozi, and Pratama (2022) chose *Friends* as the subject of their study, but they only considered the quality maxim of the Grice's principles in regard to comedy. Considering the limitations in previous studies as well as the close relationship between Grice's four maxims and amusing discourse, more studies are necessary. I choose the popular American sitcom *Friends* as the focus of my investigation. *Friends* has aired in over 220 countries and territories as of February 2022, has won six consecutive seasons as the highest-rated TV comedy, has been nominated for 62 Emmy Awards, and is viewed by an average of 25 million people per week, with over 100 billion views across all broadcast platforms

(<https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2022-02-14/doc-ikyamrna0763804.shtml>).

Clearly, this demonstrates that the program is a extremely popular comedy, and its hilarious conversations is thus worthy of analysis. Since I will be using material from the sitcom *Friends* to verify Grice's four violations, I will give you a quick overview of the show. *Friends* is a renowned comedy that follows the ups and downs of six best friends living in a New York City apartment building for a decade. The show aired 10 seasons and 236 episodes between 1994 and 2004. Rachel is a wealthy, self-centered, and attractive fashionista. Monica is a perfectionist. Phoebe is an eccentric environmentalist. Joey is ignorant and lacks intel-

ligence. Chandler, who is neurotic and uses humor to veil his diffidence, and Ross, a professor of paleontology who enjoys lengthy conversations. Due to its fantastic plot and outstanding acting, *Friends* has become the king of sitcoms and an excellent resource for learning authentic English.

In the following passage, I will select twelve collections of humorous discourse from the sitcom *Friends*. Furthermore, the study will examine the ways in which these conversations contradict Grice's four maxims. The following two research questions guided the present investigation:

- 1) Which particular cooperation principle maxims are disregarded for comic effect?
- 2) How violating four maxims may contribute to comic effect?

### 3. The Study

In the following passage, the application of discourses in *Friends* by violating quantity, quality, relation, and manner maxim will be examined in depth. There are 165 instances of hilarious statements in 30 episodes of *Friends* in which four maxims are violated in order to achieve humorous effects.

**Table 1** demonstrates that disregard for quality standards accounts for the biggest proportion (38.18%). The following section will provide examples of violating the four maxims in descending order of frequency.

The quality maxim advises against telling lies or making statements without sufficient evidence. When someone intentionally speaks something that has lost its truth, a violation of the quality maxim will ensue. Irony, metaphor, exaggeration, meiosis, and rhetorical questions will be used as rhetorical methods. According to Grice, a violation of this rule might generate a conversational implicature in which the speaker intends to voice a contrary opinion or deliberately state something inaccurate, resulting in a funny effect. Irony expresses something frequently contrary to its literal meaning; the reader or audience must decipher the underlying meaning. As a figure of speech, it breaches the quality maxim by using contrasting words or expressions. The speaker employs irony to express his or her profound meaning and emotions by stating something blatantly false. According to Grice, irony arises from obviously erroneous claims and is successfully understood. The use of irony will be pointless if there is no underlying cooperation. Consider the following instances:

(Scene: Ross has loved Rachel since the beginning of time, but every time he tries to tell her, something, such as cats or Italian men, gets in the way. Chandler finally begs Ross to ignore Rachel, but when Ross is in China on an archaeological

**Table 1.** The frequency distribution of humorous discourses that violate the four maxims.

Four maxims	Quantity	Quality	Relation	Manner	Total
Number of humorous discourses	42	63	39	21	165
Percentage	25.45%	38.18%	23.64%	12.73%	100%

dig, Chandler reveals Ross's feelings for Rachel. Rachel is astonished. She travels to the airport to see Ross upon his return, but she is unaware that he is exiting the plane with another lady. Ross is stuck between two women and has no idea how to handle the matter.)

1) *Ross: I don't know what to do. What am I gonna do? I mean, this, this is like a complete nightmare.*

2) *Chandler: Oh, I know. This must be so hard. Oh, no. Two women love me. They're both gorgeous and sexy. My wallet is too small for my fifties, and my diamond shoes are too tight. (laughter)*

—Season 2 Episode 8

When expressing disdain at others' seeming complaints but actually gloomy emotions, we prefer to declare, "Don't be dejected; think of others who are worse off than you; be content". However, Chandler purposely disregards the quality maxim by stating "that must be so hard". Through his flouting of the maxim, the comic impact becomes apparent. In this excerpt, Chandler is satirizing Ross in a cynical manner because Ross's misery is Chandler's utopia. Chandler has trouble finding and retaining girls. Ross's woes are compared to those of a man who complains about being too wealthy, such as having a wallet too tiny for a stack of fifties or diamond-encrusted shoes that do not fit. Therefore, Chandler's expressions of sympathy are the exact reverse of what he feels. He detests Ross's whining.

The use of irony and metaphor to convey his emotions in a clever and humorous manner.

The second method of flouting the quality maxim is metaphor. Metaphor is a figure of speech in which words or phrases are used to depict something by comparing it to another item but highlighting their similarities. Consider the following instances:

(Scene: The apartment of Monica and Rachel. Close to dinnertime. Monica has just informed everyone that Tim, the son of her extra boyfriend, will be attending supper.)

1) *Ross: He's coming here for Thanksgiving!*

2) *Rachel: I know, it's sick.*

3) *Monica: Why is it sick?*

4) *Rachel: Because it's Richard's son! It's like inviting a Greek tragedy over for dinner! (laughter)*

—Season 4 Episode 8

In turn (4), Rachel criticizes Monica and Tim's anticipated relationship as unsuitable by employing the Greek tragedy metaphor. People are impressed by "Greek tragedy's" amazing narrative and unexpected conclusion, such as Oedipus, who, without comprehending their identities, murders his father and marries his mother. In reality, "Greek tragedy" is an abstract notion, but Richard's son is an individual; the two have little similarities. Here, the roles associated with the obviously implausible incest connection in ancient Greek tragedy are accepted for modern characters: Monica, Richard, and the son of Richard. This

circumstance is hilarious because to the incongruous images.

The third method of flouting the quality maxim is hyperbole, which is the use of excessive language for emphasis or heightened impact. Always, hyperbole conveys the speaker's passionate feelings about something. Exaggerated expressions are used to stimulate the audience's imagination or bolster the persuasiveness of speech. From a pragmatic standpoint, hyperbole represents a violation of the quality maxim. The speaker makes a false statement and exaggerates a fact, producing amusement. Consider the following instances:

(Scene: Friends are urging Rachel to cancel the credit card issued by her father.)

1) *Monica: All right, you ready?*

2) *Rachel: No. No, no, I m not ready! How can I be ready? Hey, Rach! You are ready to jump out the airplane without your parachute? ...Come on, I can't do this! (laughter)*

—Season 1 Episode 1

As demonstrated in the example above, the funny impact is likewise generated by disregarding the quality maxim. Rachel will begin a life of independence. It is equally as risky to her as “jump out of the airplane without a parachute”, although she will not actually jump out of the airplane without a parachute. The surprising manner in which the quality maxim is disregarded generates humor.

The fourth method of flouting the quality maxim is meiosis. It signifies that the speaker in a dialogue is diminishing what has occurred. Consider the following instances:

(Scene: Ross wishes to subject his child to antenatal training in the same way as his ex-wife and her lesbian half mate do.)

1) *Ross: Look, if she's talking to it, I just think that I should get some belly time too. Not that I believe any of this.*

2) *Phoebe: Oh, I believe it. I think the baby can totally hear everything. I can show you. Look, this will seem a little weird, but you put your head inside this turkey, and then we'll all talk, and you'll hear everything we say.*

—Season 1 Episode 19

In this scenario, Phoebe instructs Ross to testify, or to put his head inside the turkey to see whether Ross can hear them. This is a pretty imaginative notion, but Phoebe simply describes it as “a little odd”. Phoebe is shown as a strange girl in this sitcom. As a result, her understatement of the vagaries is a striking embodiment of her quality.

The fifth method of flouting the quality maxim is rhetorical questions, which break the quality maxim because the speaker does not expect a response. Here is an example of a rhetorical question.

(Scene: Chandler goes to a restaurant and has his food prepared differently than he had ordered. He makes a joke with the server about the steak not being properly cooked.)

*Chandler: Boy, if this is medium well, do they still walk around when you or-*

*der it rare? (laughter)*

—Season 9 Episode 9

No matter how rare the steak is, it cannot be made from calves that are still able to move around in the restaurant. Chandler intentionally violates the principle of quality to indicate that his medium steak is overly rare. People will chuckle when they imagine a restaurant presenting trotting cow to a customer who orders a rare steak. By disregarding the principle of quality, Chandler achieves both his communicative and comedic goals.

The second most violated principle in this sitcom is the quantity maxim. Grice claimed that the maxim must satisfy two conditions. The first is that in a dialogue, a speaker's contribution must be as instructive as necessary. The second is to provide the minimum amount of information necessary. When communicating with others, individuals strive for precision and efficacy to transmit their meanings. Inadvertently or intentionally, people can breach the maxim by providing insufficient or excessive information or both at the same time. Consider the following instances:

(Scene: Chandler is concerned about the adoption center's social worker's visit in the following example. He attempts to demonstrate how amazing parents he and Monica will be, but he is concerned that what he says may be deceiving. As a result, he continues to speak, exacerbating the situation.)

*Chandler. Oh, because we love kids. Love'em to death. Well, not actually to death, that's just a figure of speech—we love kids the appropriate amount... as allowed by law. (laughter)*

—Season 10 Episode 7

Chandler provides more information than necessary to demonstrate his excitement to become a father. He attempts to convey the proper amount of love he can give children and provides the extra information "as allowed by law". His subsequent comments serve just to demonstrate that he is not well prepared for the adoption. In this way, the discord between Chandler's aim and words produces humorous results.

(Scene: Ross is no longer married. In front of his pals, he is furious and complaining. Ross invites Joey and Chandler to assist him in putting together the new furniture, which they perceive to be a difficult task.)

*1) Joey. Ross, let me ask you a question. She got the furniture, the stereo, the good TV what did you get?*

*2) Ross. You guys.*

*3) Chandler. Oh, God. (laughter)*

*4) Joey. Oh my God! (laughter)*

—Season 3 Episode 25

A New York resident places a high value on possessions such as the furnishings, radio, and television. But after the divorce, Ross is left with nothing. At that point, Chandler and Joey are as essential to him as his properties. Their friendship is accorded such great acclaim. If Chandler and Joey observe quantity maxim, they will be supposed to say "Thanks, you have us, and we'll assist you



get through it". However, Chandler only says two words: "Oh my God". The deliberate violation of the quantity maxim generates conversational implication: Chandler is so shocked. He cannot believe Ross's kind words about their friendship. The three words "Oh my God" said by Joey may not appear to convey much information, but they actually convey a whole deal more: He is so worried! He is really concerned that in the days to come, Ross will constantly whine and force them to perform laborious tasks such as furniture assembly. By disregarding the quantity maxim, Chandler and Joey's responses produce amusing results.

(Scene: Phoebe contacts Emily's stepmother during Ross and Emily's wedding rehearsal dinner, claiming she wants to talk with Joey or Chandler about Rachel's plans to disrupt Ross' wedding.)

1) *Mrs. Waltham: Hello, Waltham Interiors.*

2) *Phoebe: Oh, hi, Mrs. Waltham. I need to speak with either one of the best men, or Ross's sister Monica.*

3) *Mrs. Waltham: Who is this?*

4) *Phoebe: Oh, I'm Phoebe Buffay. I'm one of Ross's best friends.*

5) *Mrs. Waltham: Well, if you're one of Ross's best friends, why aren't you here?*

6) *Phoebe: Yeah, um, I can't fly. I'm having my brother's babies. (laughter)*

7) *Mrs. Waltham: Oh, am I on the radio? (laughter)*

8) *Phoebe: No... umm, could I talk to one of them? It's very very important.*

9) *Mrs. Waltham: No, I'm bored with you now. I'm going to cut you off. (She hangs up.) (laughter)*

10) *Phoebe: Ohh! Okay, I'm going to have to kick her ass too. (laughter)*

—Season 4 Episode 24

The quantity maxim is violated in both directions by Phoebe. On one side, she is providing too much information: the facts that she is pregnant and unable to travel would be enough to answer the question. There is no need to identify the biological father (*I'm pregnant with my brother's child*). Phoebe should offer more information to dispel the notion of incest, since she does indicate that she is carrying her brother's children (i.e. she would have to tell that she is a surrogate mother). Mrs. Waltham apparently did not believe the follow-up turn (*Am I on the radio?*), which relates to common radio phone games in which people are tricked or duped; the inference is "are you attempting to trick me?" Phoebe is unaware that the additional, confusing information she has offered may lead Mrs. Waltham to doubt the validity of her claims. And she does nothing to explain the unpleasant circumstance (*No... um... could I speak with one of them? It is very important.*), putting the "quality" of the entire dialogue at jeopardy. Mrs. Waltham ended this telephone discussion by saying, "I'm going to cut you off". Even an honest and genuine response must be supported with sufficient explanation and background knowledge to avoid being misunderstood.

The subsequent violated principle in this sitcom is the relation maxim, which demands the speaker to communicate something important to the situation and should be concise. If the speaker has reasons to bring up a topic that is unim-



portant, the conversational implicature arises, and he or she wants the listener to understand implicit means. In sitcoms, violation of the relation maxim, has a comedic effect, as seen by the following instances:

(Scene: Chandler asserts that a joke that Ross published in *Playboy* was originally his. Monica asks Rachel and Phoebe, “If you had to pick one of us to date, who would it be?” Rachel responds, “I don’t know”, but Phoebe immediately responds, “Rachel!” Monica seems quite uncomfortable about this. Monica and Chandler are squabbling.)

1) *Monica: (Visibly upset) She picked Rachel. I mean, she tried to back out of it, but it was obvious. She picked Rachel. (laughter)*

2) *Chandler: (Visibly upset) He took my joke, he took it. (laughter)*

3) *Monica: It's wrong. You know what else is wrong? Phoebe picking Rachel.*

4) *Chandler: You know who else picked Rachel? Ross, and you know what else Ross did? He stole my joke. You know what? I'm going to get a joke journal. You know? And document the date and time of every single one of my jokes. (laughter)*

—Season 6 Episode 12

Chandler is furious with Ross for stealing and releasing his joke, but Monica is disappointed that Phoebe chose Rachel over her when asked “who would you like to live with?” In the conversation, they initially breach the relation maxim. Then, they appear cooperative, but one attempts to convince the other to discuss his or her own concern. Their disregard for the relation maxim has a funny effect.

(Scene: Ross is discussing a book he has written. Others do not appear to be interested in it.)

1) *Ross: So, I just finished this fascinating book. By the year 2030, there'll be computers that can carry out the same amount of functions as an actual human brain. So theoretically you could download your thoughts and memories into this computer and-and-and live forever as a machine.*

2) *Chandler: And I just realized I could sleep with my eyes open. (laughter)*

—Season 6 Episode 7

Ross discusses his book, which focuses on science. Chandler, as a participant in this conversation, should also contribute his thoughts on the subject. Chandler, however, changes the conversation to something unrelated to Ross’s book or science. His conversational implication is unmistakable: he has no interest in such a book, and such a topic can only make him feel tired. Chandler disregards the relation maxim, but his unrelated utterance serves his rhetorical purpose: “Stop talking about it, Ross”.

The last violated principle in this sitcom is the manner maxim, which demands the speaker to deliver his or her discourse as concise, clear, and organized as possible to avoid making unclear or ambiguous statements. Because the manner maxim favors the most direct transmission of one’s literal point, we frequently observe this maxim to combat obscurity and obfuscation. If a person does not adhere to this maxim, the recipient may be confused. Sometimes, the divergent direction of the speaker’s speech might have a funny effect, as seen by

the following instances:

(Scene: Monica is recovering from her haircut, and Phoebe informs the others how Monica feels about her hair being trimmed in an unflattering manner. Phoebe is acting as a doctor.)

1) *Rachel: How is she?*

2) *Phoebe: It's too soon to tell. She's resting, which is a good sign. (laughter)*

3) *Ross: How's the hair?*

4) *Phoebe: I'm not gonna lie to you, Ross, it doesn't look good. I put a clip on one side, which seems to have stopped the curling. (laughter)*

—Season 2 Episode 1

This is a typical instance of flouting the manner maxim. Phoebe's remarks mislead the audience from “Phoebe discussing Monica's hair incident” to “doctor describing the patient's symptoms”. Phoebe speaks in the style of physicians. However, the issue of this talk is simply Monica's hair, which is not at all serious. This delusion generates humor. In interpersonal communication, as required by the manner maxim, individuals should provide information concisely and minimize needless proximity. However, occasionally they are purposefully wordy to produce amusement.

(Scene: Monica requests Phoebe's cell phone, the two argue a bit, the phone falls to the ground, and Monica picks it up.)

1) *Monica: Ha ha!*

2) *Phoebe: Damn you Monica Geller hyphen Bing! (laughter)*

—Season 9 Episode 17

We employ simple language in everyday communication. We seldom use written language, particularly punctuation. We do not say “with a comma or period” after a statement. Phoebe calls Monica by her full name and spells “hyphen” to highlight her anger in the preceding dialogue. Phoebe expresses her rage at Monica using written words, as the audience chuckles.

#### 4. Discussion and Limitation

The present study has investigated the humorous discourse from renowned sitcom *Friends* through the perspective of violation of Grice's four maxims. The results show that when the quality maxim is intended to be violated, a speaker may utilize rhetorical methods such as irony, metaphor, hyperbole, meiosis, and rhetorical question. When the quantity maxim is flouted, a speaker may provide more, less, or both amounts of information. When the relation maxim is breached, a speaker may present an irrelevant topic to suggest his or her boredom with the current conversation. When the manner maxim of disregarded, obfuscation and obscurity arise. However, these deviations of maxims provide a funny impact on a neutral spectator. In terms of creative technique, this conclusion might assist magazine columnists or screenwriters in writing hilarious pieces or character interactions. Likewise, for public audiences interested in the issue of how comedy is generated in sitcoms, this conclusion might help them comprehend the

underlying principles of laughing.

One important difference shown by the data was that some maxims were violated more often than others, with the maxims of quality and quantity being ignored more frequently than the maxims of relation and manner. Some characters ignored maxims more than others. Chandler, who was a responder in the comedy, ignored the most maxims, while Ross ignored the fewest. Moreover, when the interlocutors in a comedy assume to violate certain maxims in order to amuse their audience, and so provide certain conversational implicature, these cues are comedic effect triggers. However, can conversational implicature be classified and investigated? What maxim is flouted in order to create what sort of implication? These are issues that are not addressed in detail in the present study. Therefore, future studies may explore those issues.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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