

# Analysis of Humor in *The Mermaid* Based on Cooperative Principle

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**Abstract:** Based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, this study analyzes the humorous dialogues in the movie *The Mermaid*. By examining how the film's dialogues violate the four maxims—quantity, quality, relation, and manner, the research explores the pragmatic functions generated by these violations. The humorous language not only helps shape vivid characters, enhances thematic depth, and eases interpersonal tensions, but also offers audiences an entertaining viewing experience. Through this study, we can better learn how to use similar techniques in daily communication to enhance the humor of language.

**Keywords:** cooperative principle; humorous language; *The Mermaid*

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## 1. Introduction

Humor, a key element in human communication, draws people with its unique charm. As a core contemporary cultural carrier, movies offer visual enjoyment while reflecting human nature and social richness via humorous language. With the booming film industry, humor—an essential part of movies—not only entertains audiences but also conveys profound social and cultural meanings, making the study of film humorous dialogues theoretically and practically significant. In linguistics, Grice's Cooperative Principle explains daily language use, stating people follow norms for smooth communication. Yet intentional violations of its four maxims (quantity, quality, relation, manner) often create specific linguistic effects. Analyzing *The Mermaid*'s humorous dialogues through this principle can uncover humor's generative mechanism and provide references for future humor research.

Directed by Stephen Chow, the popular comedy *The Mermaid* uses the conflict between mermaids and humans to explore environmental protection and love. Real estate tycoon Liu Xuan's land reclamation and sonar harm marine life; mermaid Shanshan is sent to assassinate him, but they fall in love, leading Liu Xuan to abandon the project and protect mermaids. The film humorously emphasizes environmental awareness and human-nature harmony, resonating with audiences via funny plots and characters. Analyzing its humorous dialogues through the Cooperative Principle deepens understanding of the film's humor and narrative, inspiring film humor studies.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Theoretical basis

The Cooperative Principle is a communication principle proposed by the philosopher Paul Grice (1975) in his pragmatic theory. It refers to a set of basic principles that people generally follow in verbal communication to ensure effective, appropriate, and smooth exchanges. According to Grice's theory, the Cooperative Principle comprises four basic maxims: quantity, quality, relation, and manner. Quantity maxim says information given should be just enough for conversation's purpose. Quality maxim demands true, reliable information with evidence, avoiding lies. Relation maxim requires relevance, staying on topic. Manner maxim advocates clear, accurate expression, avoiding ambiguity to ensure understanding and efficient communication.

With the booming film industry, film text studies (e.g., humorous dialogue analysis of *The Mermaid*) have grown. Internationally, Marlyna Maros (2023) studied how Jordanians violated this principle to create pandemic-related Arabic humor on Facebook, finding humor highlights social and political issues. In foreign research, the Cooperative Principle has been widely applied in various fields, studying people's communicative psychology and behavior in interactions.

In China, related studies are abundant: Liu Lixing (2024) analyzed *Fall of Giants*' dialogues via the principle to explore characters and themes; Zhao Bingbing (2023) focused on its application in advertising translation (especially

intentional violations); Zhang Zhaoqin (2022) discussed it in tourism text translation; Liu Qing (2020) noted it guides courtroom language (participants may follow or violate it for goals). Domestic research mainly centers on conversational implications and translation—progress has been made, but deeper exploration is needed.

## 2.2 Review of the humor language in *The Mermaid*

Currently, the analysis of humorous dialogue in films is a hot topic in humor research. Scholars at home and abroad have extensively studied humorous expressions, effects, and impacts in films from multiple perspectives and theories, including pragmatics, discourse analysis, and more. The Cooperative Principle in sociolinguistics, which explains communication rules, has been thoroughly explored and, when applied to humorous dialogue analysis, enhances understanding of its effects in films.

Chinese director Stephen Chow's classic *The Mermaid* is a widely discussed, successful comedy, with its humorous dialogue as a key feature. Analyzing this dialogue helps understand humor's expression and effect in the film, and explore its connection to the Cooperative Principle—while scholars have already conducted in-depth research on the film's plot, theme and visual style. Among studies on *The Mermaid*, 133 theses exist, yet none analyze its humorous dialogue. This research will examine it through the Cooperative Principle. Yang Qingqing (2019) explored Liu Xuan's anxieties via humor and self-mockery, while Zhong Lili (2018) highlighted the "Stephen Chow-style" collage through minor characters and absurd dialogue elements. Foreign research lacks analysis of the film's humor.

Although there is some attention paid to the analysis of other theories regarding humorous dialogue in *The Mermaid* in China, the research perspective and depth from the Cooperative Principle still need further exploration. In-depth discussion on the application, effect, and influence of humor in the film is still of great significance. However, so far, there are relatively few analytical studies on humorous dialogue in films based on the Cooperative Principle. Therefore, this thesis will adopt the Cooperative Principle, analyze the humorous dialogue in the film based on existing research, and explore the expression and effect of humorous dialogue in the film.

## 3. Mechanism of Humor in *The Mermaid*

### 3.1 Violating the maxim of quantity

Conversation 1:

*Curator: I have hidden a mermaid . You know that.*

*Shanshan: Isn't it just a salted fish?*

*Curator: You are so scary. The exhibition ends here. Goodbye.*

In this dialogue, the tourists were visiting the exhibition of animal specimens. The curator lifted the lid of a showcase and revealed a mermaid specimen. Shanshan picked up the "mermaid" and licked it, asking the curator if it was a salted fish. In fact, it was a salted fish with a Barbie doll's head attached. Facing the tourists' questions, the curator did not directly answer their questions. He concealed part of the content of this stage of the dialogue and did not provide enough information, violating the quantity maxim. His real meaning was, "I don't want you to know that this specimen is not a mermaid, but a salted fish." This was because the curator was afraid that the tourists would demand a refund, damaging his economic interests and the reputation of the exhibition hall.

### 3.2 Violating the maxim of quality

Conversation 1:

*Curator: I am a mermaid.*

*Kong: Why do you have to suffer like this?*

*The curator sighed, "It's a real tearjerker. Let's not talk about it anymore. Let's have a good time and take a picture."*

In this dialogue, as the visitors approached the bathtub, a yellow-haired head popped out, and it was

surprisingly the curator. He crawled out of the bathtub and claimed that he was a mermaid. As a museum curator, he was supposed to be a relatively serious and professional figure, but the curator deliberately dressed up in a comical way as a mermaid. However, this claim was clearly fictitious, and the visitors knew that the curator's statement was false and inconsistent with the facts because mermaids are mythological creatures that do not exist in real life. This contrast made the visitors feel amused and funny, satisfying them and achieving the curator's goal of gaining economic benefits.

Conversation 2:

*Curator: Miss, why are you eating Batman's ear?*

*Kong: I thought it was a chicken wing.*

*Curator: You don't respect Batman, but you should respect yourself, too. Put the chicken wing back. Oh, no, it's not a chicken wing, it's Batman.*

In this humorous dialogue, the curator was introducing the animals in the hall while playing mahjong. Then he pulled the curtain aside, revealing Batman, a hybrid that could walk and fly, scientifically named "Bai Teman" and pronounced as "Batman" in English. Next to him, Miss Kong picked up Batman's ear and started eating it, saying that it was a chicken wing. To save costs, the curator deliberately misrepresented the chicken wing as Batman's ear, violating the quality maxim that requires one to speak the truth. This humorous setup not only satisfied visitors' curiosity to see a new animal specimen but also reflected the curator's selfishness and lack of ethics as a businessman, focused only on personal profit.

### 3.3 Violating the maxim of relation

Conversation 1:

*Octopus: Why did you let him go?*

*Shanshan: I can't!*

*Shanshan jumped into the water: I'm so tired. I'm dying. I can't hold on anymore.*

Liu Xuan's sonar destroyed Shanshan's home, making marine creatures homeless. Octopus and others sent Shanshan to seduce Liu Xuan to stop his plan and kill him for revenge. Yet, when Liu Xuan nearly fell into the trap, Shanshan let him go because she had developed feelings for him. Octopus questioned her, but Shanshan didn't reveal her true reason, violating the principle of relation, implying she didn't want him to know of her love.

Conversation 2:

*Ruolan: You've been watching mermaids for two hours. Are you trying to play innocent with me?*

*Liu Xuan: Aren't we destroying the ecosystem?*

*Ruolan: What are you talking about? Come over here.*

In this conversation, Ruolan was reclining seductively on the bed, wanting Liu Xuan to come over for some intimacy, but Liu Xuan was ignoring her and searching for information about mermaids on his computer. So Ruolan asked Liu Xuan if he was playing innocent with her, but Liu Xuan didn't directly answer her question. Instead, he suddenly shifted the topic to "destroying the ecosystem," which was unrelated to the conversation. Ruolan was focused on Liu Xuan and was talking about how long he had been watching "mermaids" with a teasing or puzzled tone, but Liu Xuan wasn't interested in Ruolan; his interest was in mermaids.

### 3.4 Violating the maxim of manner

Conversation 1:

*Octopus: Look how she dances with passion and is not afraid of the common views. I think she dances better than McDonald's.*

*A mermaid corrected the octopus: Is it Madonna?*

*Octopus: I said McDonald's, what can you do to me?*

To successfully assassinate Liu Xuan, the marine creature family trained Shanshan to learn skills and use her beauty to seduce Liu Xuan and then kill him. Therefore, Shanshan learned to dance. When Shanshan was dancing, he praised her for dancing better than McDonald's, which is a multinational fast-food chain. Then one of the mermaids told him that it was Madonna, not McDonald's, and Madonna is an American female singer. In this humorous conversation, the octopus, to save face, deliberately continued to call it McDonald's. McDonald's and Madonna have similarities in Chinese characters, full of ambiguity, thus creating humorous language.

Conversation 2:

*Mr. Liao: Actually, I've just met a great psychiatrist. I'll call him over right now.*

*Liu Xuan walks over: Why are you calling a psychiatrist over?*

*Mr. Liao realizes his mistake and rolls his eyes: Just to have some fun.*

After Liu Xuan escaped from the mermaid's home, he told Mr. Liao about his encounter, but Mr. Liao didn't believe him because he thought it was impossible for there to be mermaids in reality and considered Liu Xuan to be insane. He even introduced a psychiatrist to Liu Xuan. However, when Liu Xuan questioned him about why he called the doctor, he said it was just for fun. In this humorous conversation, Mr. Liao spoke indirectly and did not directly reveal his true intentions, violating the maxim of manner. This maintained Liu Xuan's dignity and avoided his embarrassment and displeasure.

## 4. Pragmatic Functions of Humor

### 4.1 Creating unique and vivid roles

Conversation 1:

*Female staff: The sonar has been completely shut down.*

*Liu Xuan: Okay.*

*Liu Xuan: Ruolan, thank you!*

*Ruolan: You're welcome. You know, I've always been supportive of you. You must have your reasons. Can you tell me why, if it's not too much trouble?*

*Liu Xuan: The sonar was too strong, and even crap was sprayed out.*

*Ruolan: You're really witty. Congratulations.*

Through humorous dialogue and character interactions, the film highlights distinct personalities. Characters like Liu Xuan use exaggerated speech to deepen audience impressions. Liu Xuan, who bought Qingluowan and used sonar to force marine creatures away, realizes his mistakes after interacting with the mermaid Shanshan and falls in love with her. When questioned by Ruolan about turning off the sonar, Liu humorously claims it was too powerful, even causing "crap to spray out", masking his true reason—his love for Shanshan and desire to protect marine life. Though Liu Xuan violates the maxim of quality by lying, both understand the real motive. The dialogue reveals Liu Xuan's genuine pursuit of protecting life and nature, contrasting with Ruolan's selfishness and indifference toward economic interests.

### 4.2 Reinforcing the theme of the movie

Conversation 1:

*Ruolan: Are you sick? Mermaids are new species. If we can get their genes, it means we'll have access to the most advanced biotechnology, which is a huge business opportunity. You understand, don't you?*

*Liu Xuan: But...*

*Ruolan: Money, money! Don't you want money?*

*Liu Xuan: I want money. But you should have a limitation, you can't go against your conscience!*

*Ruolan scoffs: Conscience? It's up to you to protect the earth and maintain world peace, Mr. Conscience.*

In the dialogue above, after testing the sonar and realizing its devastating impact on marine creatures, Liu Xuan

requests to turn off the sonar. However, Ruolan, motivated by profit, chastises Liu Xuan's request and mocks him as "Mr. Conscience." In reality, Ruolan knows that Liu Xuan's real reason for wanting to turn off the sonar is because he has fallen in love with the mermaid Shanshan and doesn't want to use the sonar to force them to leave their home in Qingluowan. Similarly, Liu Xuan knows that he loves Shanshan, and as a result, he wants to protect the marine creatures represented by her. This humorous dialogue approach reinforces the film's theme of urging audiences to pay attention to and protect the natural environment, constantly improving environmental awareness, and changing their attitudes and behaviors towards the environment. By using humor, the film enables viewers to consider these serious issues while laughing, thus deepening the film's ideological content.

#### **4.3 Relieving the anxiety of the roles**

Conversation 1:

*Liu Xuan: We were having a good discussion. Why do you suddenly need to spray pesticide?*

*Zheng Zong: Spray pesticide? You're so out of date. This is a flying device produced by the high-tech company I just acquired.*

In the above conversation, Mr. Zheng initially assumed that Liu Xuan had purchased the Qingluowan project at a loss and was relieved that he had sold a piece of land next to Qingluowan to himself. However, upon learning that Liu Xuan had obtained the approval for land reclamation in Qingluowan, Mr. Zheng angrily boarded his flying device and left. As the flying device took off, it emitted sparks, resembling the spraying of pesticides on crops. Liu Xuan teasingly asked why he was spraying pesticides, though he knew they were actually sparks from the flying device. Liu Xuan's humorous question significantly improved Mr. Zheng's angry and anxious mood, creating a humorous and relaxed atmosphere, enhancing the conversational fun.

Conversation 2:

*Liu Xuan: What happened?*

*Assistant: He flew out of the window.*

*Liu Xuan: What?*

*Shanshan: He can perform magic tricks.*

In this conversation, Liu Xuan and Shanshan went out for a date and dinner. An octopus disguised as a chef walked in and stood at the counter in front of Liu Xuan to cook. He roared loudly and extended his eight tentacles, holding knives and forks, ready to assassinate Liu Xuan. Liu Xuan's bodyguard came out upon hearing the commotion. So, the octopus put his exposed tentacles on the hot iron plate and put them into the meat grinder. The octopus was so painful that it sprayed ink and flew out of the window. Liu Xuan was surprised and concerned about this sudden situation. To cover up the octopus's attempt to assassinate Liu Xuan, Shanshan explained that he could perform magic tricks. Through this humorous remark, they prevented Liu Xuan from discovering their true intentions, eliminating his suspicion, protecting the safety Shanshan and the octopus, and easing the tense and anxious atmosphere.

#### **5. Conclusion**

To facilitate smooth communication, people generally follow the Cooperative Principle, though intentional or unintentional violations may occur for specific purposes. This thesis analyzes humorous dialogue in *The Mermaid* from the Cooperative Principle perspective, summarizing the humor mechanism through its violations. It reviews domestic and international research on the principle and humorous dialogue, then examines film dialogues violating quality, quantity, relation, and manner maxims—with quality maxim violations being primary and generating much humor. Finally, it explores the pragmatic functions of these violations, confirming the principle's importance in humor analysis. Characters in the film create humorous scenes by violating the principle, reflected in clever language use and integrated into character relationships, enriching the film's vividness. This research helps us apply similar

techniques in daily conversations to enhance humor.

Finally, this study also has some deficiencies. The research on the humorous dialogue in this movie is not yet sufficient and in-depth, and there may be more examples to be explored. We hope to continue to improve and refine in future research.

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