A Linguistic Strategies to Express Humor in Thai Context

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Abstract—The main purpose of this research is to explore the ways that humor is expressed, taking into account linguistic strategies used. Speech act categorization, cooperative principle and implicatures are the frameworks applied in this research. The source of data for analysis is five Thai situation comedies. From a speech-act theoretical perspective, the findings demonstrate that there are six categories of humor-related speech acts: expressing condescension, boasting, blaming, threatening, satire and teasing. These strategies, on the whole, indicate that humor in Thai situation comedies is closely associated with an emotion of superiority and aggression created by the speaker. The study also shows that humor can be carried out by non-observance of the cooperative principle in two ways: violating a maxim and flouting a maxim. In the first case, the maxim was found to have been flouted and revealed instances of conversational implicatures. In the second case, furthermore, conversational implicature were generated, but as a result of maxim violation. What is peculiar to the findings of the study is that humor can be brought about by a speaker intentionally telling a lie to confuse the hearer or audience. Later, when the speaker reveals that he/she him/herself is held responsible for a maxim violation, laughter and thus humor ensue. Aside from this, there is only one example of humor-related conventional implicaturesfound.

Index Terms—Humor, Thai situation comedies, speech act, implicature, pragmatic analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

In everyday life we are often involved in something humorous, for example, hearing funny stories, telling humorous narratives, and then such jokes elicit smiles and laughter. These actions reflect sense of humor which is thus seen as part of the creative activity of humans. Theories in humor studies are proposed to account for its origins which are categorized into three groups [1] say, incongruity theory, release theory, and hostility theory. Incongruity theory of Kant and Schopenhauer [2] states that humor is perceived the incongruity between what is expected and what actually occurs, and laughter is a response to the perception of incongruity. For example, to dress a man in woman's clothes highlights contrast that produces laughter. Release theory of Freud [3] attempts to describe laughter is a form of sexual or aggressive release. In the final category of humor theory, it is superiority theory. Laughter expresses feelings of superiority over other people. Here Ross [4] cited case of humor. We laugh at a man who walks down on a street, slips on a banana peel, and falls over.

There are circumstances in which humor may occur. Especially, the playful function of language is important for expressing humor. It is, therefore, interesting to find out how language is often used as a tool of humor. However, humor is often based on culture; thus, it is difficult to use English to communicate from one culture to another [5]. As far as linguists focus on language play that is concerned with the use of language with intent to amuse. Taxonomy of the different types of language play e.g. phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, etc. is adopted in deliberate jokes to provoke laughter [6]. However, some jokes rely on a supra-structure, pragmatics, such as playing with the rules of conversation [7]. Linguistic structures, say phonology, morphology, lexis, syntax, etc. may not explain why the jokes are funny. The jokes exploit interactional meaning, not just the characters of the jokes, but also the intention of speakers and the interpretation of hearers need to be taken into consideration [8], [9]. The article, thus, aims at pragmatic analyze of humor in Thai situation comedies.

II. METHODOLOGY

The main purpose of this research is to explore the ways humor is expressed, taking into account linguistic strategies based on Speech Act Theory [10], [11], cooperative principles and implicature [12], and also included are humorous theory, say, Incongruity Theory of Kent and Schopenhauer, Superiority Theory of Hobbes [2], and Release Theory [3]. The data are collected from recording five Thai situation comedies by means of simple random sampling, and then transcribed into Thai alphabets. Analyzed are the selected utterances that used to provoke laughter according to "producers' expectation", instead of audiences on television. There are two justifications for this. First situation comedies are one-way communication that gives limited audience feedback. What makes people laugh is the unexpected bolt from the blue, so it cannot be used to determine data selection for this research. Furthermore the use of laugh and drum track is a criteria for data selection. Although nonverbal communication and paralinguistic features may provoke laughter, but here are not included in analysis.

III. SPEECH ACT

Speech act theory arose from Austin's observation on the limitation of truth-conditional semantics, that is, the meaningful statements can be tested in terms of truth or falsity.

Example 1: There are three cats in the house.

Example 2: I eat eggs and ham for breakfast.

In example 1 and 2 the sentences can be judged to be true if you encounter such utterances in the real world.

Austin [9] attempts to identify many instances in ordinary language cannot be judged true or false, and he do propose his belief that there are a lot more to a language than meaning

of its words and phrases. He is convinced that we do not just use language to make a statement, but we use it to perform actions [13].

Example 3: I warn you the road is very icy.

Example 4: I name this ship Queen Elizabeth.

From speech act perspective, example 3 and 4 have no truth conditions, but they perform actions of warning the hearer and announcing the ship's name respectively. These are called "speech act". Subsequently, Searle [11] tries to develop Austin's concept of speech act by adding some factors, such as speech act condition, to clearly distinguish types of speech act. A set of speech act conditions are propositional content condition (whether the content of utterances is relevant to its intention), preparatory condition (whether the authority of the speaker and the circumstances of the speech act are appropriate to its being performed successfully), sincerity condition (whether the speech act is being performed seriously and sincerely), and essential condition (whether a speaker intends that an utterance be acted upon by the addressee). Here is, for example, speech act condition for requesting.

Propositional content condition: the requested act is a future act of the hearer.

Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the hearer can perform the requested act; it is not obvious that the hearer would perform the requested act without being asked.

Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely wants the hearer to perform the requested act.

Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to have the hearer do an act.

IV. COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE AND IMPLICATURE

The concept of cooperative principle (or CP) is introduced by Grice [12]. He believes that there are a set of regularities in interaction a speaker could hold to achieve mutual conversational ends. Here are four conversational maxims which he says people try to abide by in conversation.

Maxim of Quantity:

Make your contribution as informative as is required.

Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

Maxim of Quality:

Do not say what you believe to be false

Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

Maxim of Relation:

Be relevant.

Maxim of Manner:

Avoid obscurity of expression.

Avoid ambiguity.

Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

Be orderly.

However, people fail to adhere to the conversational maxims in five ways: flouting, violating, infringing, opting out, and suspending. There are many reasons to break a maxim, for example, opting out of a maxim is that explicit information cannot be satisfied, for example, a journalist asks a police to give some details about the case, and the police responses "Sorry, that is confidential." Infringement is often done with the inability to speak clearly. Suspending a maxim does not generate any implicatures, but under certain circumstances people cannot observe the maxims. The most interesting category in the case of jokes is violating [14], and flouting. A maxim violation occurs when a speaker fail to observe the maxim with intention of misleading; for instance, politicians say they work with honesty and integrity, and a month later, they are arrested for corruption. Flouting maxims happen when people do not always follow these maxims as they want to communicate an implicature.

It is clear that cooperative principle provides tools to construct implicature; that is, to intentionally convey a different meaning other than what is literally spoken. Grice [12] introduced conventional implicatures, and conversational implicatures. Conventional implicatures is concerned with some words uttered such as but, even, therefore, and yet; not flouting maxims [15].

Example 5: Mary suggested black, but I chose white.

Notice that the word 'but' in this case implies the speaker is confident to choose the color s/he would like to, and not follow Mary's suggestion. The word 'but' always carries the implicature that what follows will run encounter to expectations, and the word holds this implicature regardless of the context where it occurs.

Another kind of implicature is conversational implicature which arise in a particular context of utterance. Grice [12] propose two types of this implicature: generalized implicature and particularized implicature. The first implicature arise in cases which the use of indefinite words in an utterance. Here is an adapted from Grice [12].

Example 6: A: Hi, what is up? Wanna have a beer? B: I am meeting a woman this evening.

In the example, the word "a" in this context generates generalized implicature. The use of indefinite article implies that the woman in question has not been known.

The latter is particularized implicature which depends on particular features of the context. Here is an example.

Example 7: A: Smith does not seem to have a girlfriend these days. B: He has been paying a lot of visits to New York lately.

In this example the speaker B makes a response which seems to not answer the speaker A's utterance. In fact, it would be possible to work through deductive process – that is, the speaker B is likely to come to the conclusion that Smith may have a girlfriend who lives in New York, therefore causing he often visits there.

V. RESULTS

The findings are presented into two parts: language strategies to express humor in pragmatic perspective and people's intentions in doing so are interpreted according to cooperative principle and implicature. From a speech-act theoretical perspective, the findings demonstrate that there are six broad categories of humor-related speech acts: boasting, expressing condescension, threatening, blaming, teasing and satire. Here are presented the definitions of each speech acts together with examples.

A. Boasting

Boasting is defined as a statement which you proudly tell other people about what you done or what you own. Here are felicitous conditions for boast. Propositional content

condition: the boast act is what a speaker done or owns. Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the boast act can satisfy your own. Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely wants to perform the boast act. Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to do an act. Here is an example.

Example 8: A nephew who has a mental retardation is talking to his grandmother.

A grandmother: Can you show me you can act as a normal person?

A nephew: Yes, I can. I am a normal person. Mental retardation seems to be little.

B. Expressing Condescension

Expressing condescension is an utterance that shows a speaker think s/he is more important or more intelligent or wealthier than other people. Here are felicitous conditions for expressing condescension. Propositional content condition: the condescension act is a future or past act of the hearer. Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the hearer is not important, intelligent, or wealthy. Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely wants to insult the hearer. Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to insult the hearer. Here is an example.

Example 9: A candidate tries to install election campaign posters in front of the competitor's house.

A man: How dare you install your election campaign posters in front of the competitor's house?

A man: I am RICH and here I show off my wealth. I will bet you cannot do it. You will never make it to the top.

C. Threatening

Threatening is a statement that says to do something hurt a hearer. Here are felicitous conditions for threatening. Propositional content condition: the threatening act is a future act of the speaker. Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the threatening act can damage the hearer. Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely wants the hearer to be afraid. Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to feel the hearer in danger. Here is an example.

Example 10: A shop owner is angry with the customer coming to have lunch.

A customer: I owe you only three meals.

A shop owner: I want scolded. You have not paid for all meals in this month. Why do you say you owe me only three meals?

A customer: They are breakfast, lunch, and dinner for each day.

A shop owner: Hmm you give a tongue-in-cheek answer, but I will slice your tongue off!

D. Blaming

Blaming is an utterance that the hearer responsible for a bad situation. Here are felicitous conditions for blaming. Propositional content condition: the requested act is a past act of the hearer. Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the act of hearer is inappropriate or incorrect. Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely feels the hearer to be responsible for a bad situation. Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to show satisfaction and anger. Here is an example.

Example 11: An employee walking past his boss who is courting a girl.

A boss: Why do not you come in here now? It interrupts me.

E. Teasing

Teasing is a statement said to the hearer in order to have fun by embarrassing or annoying them slightly in friendly way. Here are felicitous conditions for teasing. Propositional content condition: the teasing act is about the hearer. Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the teasing act can provoke laughter. Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely intends to embarrass the hearer. Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to embarrass the hearer to be funny. Here is an example

Example 12: As a wife stumbles in dark, she accidentally tread on a snare that her husband place.

A wife: It is not a mouse. It is me!

A husband: I expect to get a mouse. I get "THE KING KONG" instead.

(He giggles.)

F. Satire

Satire is an utterance that criticizes the hearer in humorous way. Here are felicitous conditions for teasing. Propositional content condition: the satire act is a past act of the hearer in funny way. Preparatory condition: the speaker believes the action is a mistake or a defect of hearer. Sincerity condition: the speaker genuinely wants to embarrass or hurt the hearer. Essential condition: the utterance counts as an attempt by the speaker to embarrass or hurt the hearer in humorous way in order to make fun to others.

Example 13: A husband wants to send the ex-wife at the airport, but the husband meet his wife at the door.

A husband: I got a sore throat suddenly; so I cannot send you at the airport.

A wife: You really feel sick, or I am your gooseberry.

In addition, the study further shows that humor can be conveyed by non-observance of the cooperative principle in violating maxims. Here are examples.

Example 14: A customer and the shop owners are talking about naming the shop.

A man: I heard that the monk is famous for his sanctity. Many people became wealthy and their businesses flourish after the monk gives name shops.

Shop owners: Really?

A man: Absolutely.

Shop owners: Why do not we invite the monk to name our shop?

A man: He is dead for a long time.

Example 14 violates the maxim of quantity by not providing enough information; thus misleading that the monk is still alive.

Example 15: A man gives a present his girlfriend.

A man: I have a surprise present for you. Can you guess what it is?

A woman: Really? I have no idea.

A man: Here it is. (A man shows a new smart phone.)

A woman: Wow! A remote control!

A man: (He looks startled.)

A woman: I know it is a new smart phone. Just joking!

In the example 15 the maxim of quality is violated. The woman intends to lie what she see to her boyfriend.

Example 16: A family send the grandmother to an ICU room.

A daughter: Doctor, how about my mother?

A doctor: Calm down. The patient is not in a serious condition. Do not worry; she just cannot breathe by herself.

A daughter: Is that called in a coma?

A doctor: The patient is not a coma. She is fifty-fifty.

A nephew: Fifty-fifty is so expensive. Will it be eighty-twenty, doctor?

Example 16 is an absurd joke, with a certain irrelevant utterance in the last turn from the present context, and thus the maxim of relevance is violated.

Example 17: A man help an elderly to cross the road.

A man: Do not you have any relatives whom take care of you?

An elderly: Yes, I have. I have one younger brother and one younger sister. The younger sister lives in Chiang Mai, northern of Thailand, and the younger brother lives in Rayong, southern of Thailand.

A man: Why do not they take you to live with them?

An elderly: The one want to take me to live in Chiang Mai, and another one want to take me to live in Rayong.

A man: You are so lucky. Both want to take care of you.

An elderly: No, the one who lives in Chiang Mai wants to take me to Rayong, while the one who lives in Rayong wants to take me to Chiang Mai.

Example 17 violates the submaxim of manner: avoid ambiguity. The speaker deliberately does verbal humor based on ambiguity. The word 'the one' of third turn is not clear to refer to the brother or the sister.

As can be seen, the jokes often exploit the fact that meanings and references cannot straightforwardly decode from words and structures. The example above led you into expecting one thing, but finally another thing is revealed. The clash between what you expect and what you discover is the trigger for the potential humor. This is accounted for by an important theory in humor studies, namely, incongruity theory.

Furthermore, conventional implicature can generate humor in some contexts. Here is an example.

Example 18: A female boss visits an employee who is contagious with a chickenpox.

A female boss: Poor boy! You are sick with a chickenpox.

A male employee: Are you disgusting me?

A secretary: No, she is not disgusting you, but she does not want to come close to you.

Notice that the use of 'but' expresses the contrast between "she is not disgusting you" and "she does not want to come close to you." The incongruity of two contrasting phrases can provoke laughter.

VI. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results indicate that six broad categories of speech acts: boasting, expressing condescension, threatening, blaming, teasing and satire can be used to convey humor in Thai situation comedies. It is skeptical how the first four speech acts are funny. In fact these speech acts potentially provoke laughter especially in situation comedies because the hearers are audiences who are "outsiders" and recognize that everything is facetious. Also, maxim violations can generate effective humor. Raskin [16] claims the concept of bona-fide communication and non-bona-fide communication to account for this phenomenon. At the beginning of conversation a hearer is misled into sincere communication, and later a speaker reveal that this communication is playful. Finally a hearer may be realized and accepted it, no anger with a speaker.

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