ANALYSIS OF HUMOR IN *THE BIG BANG THEORY* BY USING RELEVANCE THEORY: A PRAGMATIC STUDY

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Abstract

Humor has been studied from different disciplinary viewpoints including philosophy, psychology, sociology, literature, rhetoric, linguistic and others by many scholars and experts. Thus, with the development of humor study, the linguistic perspective is becoming the mainstream of thoughts because it is more applicable and more systematic. In that case, to understand the pattern of communication in humor, the study of pragmatic is needed. Therefore, this research is aimed to analyze humor that are produced in *The Big Bang Theory* (a famous sitcom in America) from the perspective of cognition and communication. The analysis is done by applying descriptive method and using Sperber and Wilson's theory of relevance theory. As the result of the analysis, it shows that there is a lot of humors that are based on relevance communication so that the application of relevance theory must be applied in order to understand the context of the humor. Further, the writer also noticed that the form of verbal humor used in *The Big Bang Theory* mostly showing about common problems and drama situation such friendship, job and daily life. In addition, regarding to the relevance theory of communication, the writer also noticed that the mechanism of humor in *The Big Bang Theory* is using the moment of optimal relevance of cognitive principle which means that when the audience has a common presumption of a context of conversation, the speaker or the characters in the sitcom is producing or uttering something unexpected in order to make the audience laugh or joy in humor.

Keywords: context of humor, humor, pragmatic, relevance theory

INTRODUCTION

Humor is defined as anything (can be text or verbal) that makes people laugh or feel amused or the capacity to recognize what is funny about a situation or a person (Gardner, 2008; Ayu, 2018). Meanwhile Martin in Vivona (2014) stated that humor is considered as an emotional response of joy in a social context that is elicited by a perception of playful incongruity and is expressed through smiling and laughter. Humor is manifested through language. Language serves as one of the devices to convey message that we want to share among people (Kuswoyo, 2016:257; Afrianto et. al, 2014:78; Samanik, 2018). Socially, in everyday life language is utilized to obtain and establish social life and world (Puspita and Pranoto, 2021). Thus, it can be said that humor is known as anything that invites laugh and joy. Using humor also is impactful in escalating atmosphere into a relaxing, comforting, and tension-reducing setting (Pranoto, 2020). Humor also comes in many forms, it can be from the narrative jokes, irony and even sarcasm (Vuorela in Oyancha, 2015). One of the common examples where humor can be seen is from TV shows, such stand-up comedy, humor speech, verbal humor in cartoon to a comedy that generally appears on TV series (*The Simpsons*, *Family Guy*, *Friends*, *How I met Your Mother* and many others).

Interestingly, humor also has been studied from different view point including philosophy, psychology, sociology, literature, linguistics and others (Dynel, 2009). In that case, with the development of humor study, the linguistic perspective is becoming the mainstream of thoughts because it is more applicable and more systematic. As it supported by Raska in Anggraini (2014) that humor is categorized as violation of principle of communication suggested by pragmatic principles, both textually

and interpersonally. Therefore, in order to understand the pattern of communication and the relevance in the humor, the study of pragmatic is needed. According to (Hutauruk, 2020) Pragmatic is the ability of someone as the hearer to understand the message implied by the speaker. Pragmatic concern in meaning in interaction or context consist of speaker meaning and utterance interpretation (Inayati, 2014). In Pragmatic also can be analyzed by using speech act theory, more precisely commissive speech act (Firdaus, 2020). Since pragmatic is the study of language use, thus human interaction is needed so that the interaction between meaning and context during communication can be applied (Gauché, 2017; Amelia, & Daud, 2020). However, with some variations of theories in pragmatic, the writer found one of the effective theories that can be used to analyze the process of humor that is known as relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson (1995). Here, the term relevance refers to contextual effect and processing effort and the purpose of this theory is to explain how the audience or the hearer infers the speaker's meaning based on the context of the communication (Minewaki, et al, 2005). And they should to understand the implicit meaning of the utterance delivered (Fitri, 2016).

Furthermore, the writer also found some similar researches and studies that are discussing about humor as linguistics analysis, such as Alhamzi (2015) who investigated the verbal irony in a model of Arabic literature particularly one of the poems written by the well-known poet. The result of findings show that A variety of symbols, connotative names and adjectival words are used by the Arabic poet, employing his linguistic repertoire to highlight the efficient role of irony in a literary discourse. Wang (2016) examines the mechanisms of the humor generation from the perspective of cognition and communication in the TV show series, *Friends*. The result of the finding shows that All of human's communications obey with the relevance principle (Istiani, & Puspita, 2020). As a form of language, humor has a great deal of pragmatics study. Hu (2013) examined verbal humor found in the sitcom of *The Big Bang Theory* (season 1 episode 1). The result of the finding shows that all of the humor in *The Big Bang Theory* (season one) comes from the contrast between maximal relevance and optimal relevance.

Therefore, this research is aimed to describe the mechanism of humor based on the perspective of cognition and communication that are used in *The Big Bang Theory* (season 12). Moreover, the writer hopes that this research is expected to give readers an overview of how pragmatic study is applied in order to analyze humor.

METHOD

The writer employed Sperber and Wilson's theory (1995) about relevance theory with pragmatics as the basis approach. Recently, pragmatics is studied in a variety of disciplines (e.g., linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, cognitive science, language pathology, law, theology, artificial intelligence), and specific definitions tend to be geared toward the researcher's field of study (Sperber & Noveck, 2004: 1). However, pragmatic itself is actually concern with how language is used as media for communication to others (Sinclair, 1995). In that case, pragmatics only can be studied as the interaction between meaning and context during communication with others. However, since communication is a decoding and inferential process, the hearers' interpretation is never similar to the speaker's intentions, but it can be presumed close enough for the hearers to comprehend (Carston, 2008). Regarding to that, the writer found that the situation of humor mostly showing irrelevant communication but still relevant in certain context. Hence, in order to understand the situation or the process of humor in that humor, relevance theory must be applied. The findings are then described qualitatively. In this research, the collected data are discussed and analyzed by using some relevant approaches which structured or written as in descriptive (Gulö and Rahmawelly, 2018). Further, qualitative method also concerns on inductive and deductive processes (Suprayogi, & Pranoto, 2020; Rido et. al, 2020; Mandasari, & Aminatun, 2019; Sari, & Oktaviani, 2021).

Relevance theory is a psychological, communication-based theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson to explain how individuals comprehend each other (Sperber and Wilson in Gauché, 2017: 59). Here, Sperber and Wilson (1995) defining "relevant communication" as "information that modifies and improves an overall representation of the world" by connecting with previous knowledge;

that is, information that is worthy of attention. Thus, regarding to the explanation, it can be said that the relevant communication only happens when both of speaker and listener are know well about the topic and the context of their conversation.

The main point of relevance theory is based on pragmatical study where in order to understand the communication, it depends on the listener's understanding and knowledge. As stated by Sperber and Wilson (2012: 5) that in order to communicate effectively, both speakers and hearers need this mutual understanding to form meta-representations. Moreover, relevance theory is based on two basic important elements, they are communication as cognitive process and cognitive communication as inference process where both of them are related each other so that the relevance communication can be done and the point is, those two principles describe how and why the processes that lead to comprehension are triggered during communication (Sperber and Wilson in Shuqin, 2013).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The research is analyzed the mechanism of humor based on the perspective of cognition and communication from Sperber and Wilson (1995) of relevance theory that are applied in *The Big Bang Theory* (season 12). However, since there are so many data found in the season 12, the writer only presented some examples in this journal.

4.1 Datum 1

Raj: "*Sounds like someone's in there.*"
Bernadette: "*My Good, what if Sheldon and Amy are getting robbed?*"
Howard: "*Or worse, what if they're back early?*"

The scene above is taken when Leonard and his friends are going to his apartment and suddenly, all of them are hearing loud voice from Sheldon's apartment which is very weird because Sheldon and Amy (her wife) is honey moon to some places. Thus, in this situation, Raj is the first noticed that there is someone in Sheldon's apartment by saying, "*Sounds like someone's in there.*"

Further, Bernadette (Howard's wife) is assuming that maybe there is a thief in Sheldon's apartment by saying, "*My Good, what if Sheldon and Amy are getting robbed?*", which in this case, it makes the audience to have the similar thought with Bernadette. Thus, the optimal relevance in this situation happened when Howard says, "*Or worse...*" which in this case, it makes the audience speculate another worst-case scenario about the situation in Sheldon's apartment. However, instead of gives another speculation or perspective about the worst thing that possibly happened in Sheldon's apartment such burglar, thief, thug or even rats, Howard is saying, "*what if they're back early?*" which in this case, the word "they" refers to both Amy and Sheldon.

Related to the series of this sitcom, Sheldon is the character who highly intelligent but very arrogant which makes most of the characters in *The Big Bang Theory* hate him all of the time. However, for some point of view, Sheldon is an honest man and childish like so that people around him feel so amused. In that case, the writer noticed that for some people who are never watching *The Big Bang Theory* sitcom, it would be very hard to find the humor from Howard's statement.

4.2 Datum 2
Amy: "*Who's Tam?*"
Sheldon: "*He was my best friend in the whole world growing up.*"
Amy: "*Really? Why have I never heard you mention him before?*"
Sheldon: "*Oh, of course I have. I'm sure I've mentioned him, like five times this week.*"
Amy: "*I don't think you have.*"
Sheldon: "*Tam! Tam! Tam! Tam! Tam! There, it's only Thursday.*"

The situation above happened when Sheldon got email from his old friend, Tam and Amy feel curious since Sheldon never mentioned Tam as long as they together. As it seen from the conversation, after Amy asks Sheldon that she never heard him mention Tam before, Sheldon directly says that he has mentioned his best friend like five times this week. In this case, related to the communicative principle, the reply from Sheldon creates an assumption of relevance to the audience so that the audience would seek for the maximal relevance based on the situation.

Thus, as the possibility of optimal relevance, the audience might think that when Sheldon stated that he mentioned Tam, it indicated that Sheldon brings topic of his best friend Tam into a conversation, whether between him and Amy or with his other friends. However, after Amy make sure Sheldon that he really never talks about his old friend, Sheldon suddenly mentions the name of Tam for five times which in this case, the statement from Sheldon indicates another form of irrelevant reason but still in optimal relevant related with the context of "mention". Hence, the audience begins to extend the formerly formed contextual assumptions and concluded that what Sheldon means by saying "mention" is not bring the name of his old friend, Tam into a conversation, but only mentioning the name of Tam literally five times in a row in front of Amy.

4.3 Datum 3
Tam: "*What are you guys talking about?*"
Leonard: "*Why did you and Sheldon stop being friends? What did you do?*"
Raj: "*And don't worry, even though we just met you, we think you're right and he's wrong.*"

On the scene above, Leonard, Raj and Howard try to find Sheldon childhood friend, Tam to ask what makes them lose contact to each other. As it seen, Tam confuse when Leonard is asking about the problem between them by saying, "*What are you guys talking about?*". Thus, regarding to the cognitive principle, after Raj says, "*and don't worry, even though we just met you…*" the audience start to create an assumption as the form of maximal relevance where they think that Raj possibly wants to said that they (Leonard, Howard and Raj) are not judging whatever Tam is going to say or Raj simply wants to say "*we understand*".

However, instead of showing those kinds of reaction, Raj continually says, "*we think you're right and he's wrong*" to Tam which in this case, it makes the audience create a contextual assumption. Here, the audience get the conclusion that instead of assuming that Tam have problem with Sheldon, Raj more prefers that Sheldon probably the one who think he has problem with Tam because as long as Raj, Leonard and Howard know Sheldon, he hates almost everything which makes Sheldon very selfish.

4.4 Datum 4

Amy: "*Sheldon, do you want to put the tables after each section or in an appendix at the end?*"
Sheldon: "*You know what? We wrote this paper together. I think we should decide together that they go in an appendix at the end.*"

The data above shows a conversation between Amy and Sheldon when they are discussing about the composition of their paper of Super-Asymmetry theory project. As it seen, Amy is asking whether Sheldon wants to put the tables after each section or in an appendix at the end. In that case, related to the cognitive principle, when Sheldon replies to Amy by saying, "*You know what? We wrote this paper together...*" the audience would seek for the maximal relevance which they think that Sheldon will discuss about the decision together with Amy. However, instead of showing the intention of discussion, Sheldon selflessly says to Amy that they decide together that the tables are in the appendix at the end. Thus, the audience formed contextual assumption based on the situation that Sheldon is a selfish character because he wants everything must be done just like his desires.

4.5 Datum 5

Leonard: "*Sheldon is not gonna be happy about this.*"
Howard: "*Well, he's gonna be less happy about this, uh…"The super-asymmetric model is inherently flawed and does not bear the weight of further examination.""*
Leonard: "*So, this disproves their theory?*"
Howard: "*Sounds like it.*"
Leonard: "*Oh, how are we gonna tell him?*"
Howard: "*That's easy. Just go up to him and say, "Sheldon,…Raj has something to tell you.""*

The scene above happened at the cafeteria when Leonard and Raj is asking Howard for help in translating a book that is related to super-asymmetric model since it is written in German language. Apparently, the author of the book is proposed the similar idea of Sheldon about super-asymmetry theory and as the matter of fact, the content of the book disproves the theory itself as it is translated by Howard. Knowing that information, Leonard needs to tell Sheldon about it but does not know how to do it that can be seen when Leonard says, "*Oh, how are we gonna tell him?*"

In that case, regarding to the communicative principle, when Howard says, "*That's easy.*", the audience formed maximal relevance by assuming that Howard will express a simple solution by telling Sheldon the truth or he will suggest that all three of them can tell Sheldon in proper way. However, instead of doing those things, Howard just simply points out Raj to tell that bad news to Sheldon by saying, "*Sheldon…Raj has something to tell you.*" Thus, based on the situation, the audience also formed a contextual assumption that Howard is such a coward who cannot even face Sheldon and tell him the truth.

CONCLUSION

Regarding to the result of findings, the writer concluded that there are a lot of humors that are based on relevance communication so that the application of relevance theory must be applied in order to understand the context of the humor. Further, the writer also noticed that the form of verbal humor used in *The Big Bang Theory* mostly showing about common problems and drama situation such friendship, job and many others. However, for the context that are hardly can be understand by the readers such are topics that contains with cultures and scientific terminologies are not written as part of the data in the analysis.

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