

A Study of Humorous Language in Talk Shows from the Perspective of Pragmatic Presupposition: A Case Study of *The Tonight Show*

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Abstract: The mechanism of humor has become the focus of academic attention and pragmatic presupposition plays a key role in revealing the implied meaning and information processing in language communication. Through the case study of *The Tonight Show*, the thesis aims to analyze humor generation mechanism from the perspective of pragmatic presupposition. Four aspects of pragmatic presuppositions, including the mutual knowledge and defeasibility of pragmatic presupposition, false pragmatic presupposition and clarified pragmatic presupposition, along with three humor types of puns, satire and absurdity, are respectively discussed for decoding the humor generation mechanism. Qualitative methods are applied to dissect 21 episodes (Episode 58-78) of *The Tonight Show Season 9*, analyzing the frequency and distribution of each presupposition and humor aspect. Specifically, four examples, categorized by four types of pragmatic presuppositions, are selected here to discuss and elaborate on the humor invoked by pragmatic presuppositions.

Keywords: Humor; humorous language; pragmatic presupposition; *The Tonight Show*

1. Introduction

In recent years, talk shows have won a wide popularity among Chinese people, and the reasons behind are worth exploring. Analyzing talk-show humor from the perspective of pragmatic presuppositions gives us new insights of humor generation mechanism. We could specifically spot pragmatic presuppositions in passages or statements and try to understand the hypothesis or even the underlying meanings impelled in the context.

Gottlob Frege raised the concept of presupposition in *Sense and Reference*^[1]. He believes that presupposition is a phenomenon in language usage and has something to do with the classification of sense and reference. Later, these pragmatic presuppositions fell into a separate category of pragmatic inferences. Levinson^[2] (2001) defined pragmatic presupposition as mutual knowledge, which cannot be divorced from contexts.

In the '80s, domestic humor studies started from a linguistic viewpoint, differing from international approaches. Tan's '97 humor classification^[3] into verbal and situational types underscored the importance of language in verbal humor. Current domestic research focuses on Pragmatics and Cognitive Linguistics, often using English comedies as subjects. Zhou^[4] (2016) examined verbal humor in sitcoms like "*Two Broke Girls*," investigating humor mechanisms and their educational relevance. Zhou^[5] (2018) pinpointed the Cooperative Principle, Conversational Implicature, and Pragmatic Presupposition as key in pragmatics.

In *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (1994)^[6], Salvatore Attardo systematically categorizes verbal humor based on linguistic mechanisms, emphasizing how language structure and meaning interact to produce humorous effects. His classification distinguishes between form-driven humor and content-driven humor. The form-driven humor exploits the formal properties of language, such as sound, grammar, or lexical ambiguity, and includes three types of humor such as puns, wordplay and syntactic ambiguity. Content-Based Humor relies on shared knowledge, pragmatics, or situational incongruity, and includes four types of humor such as irony, parody, satire and absurdity.

2. Research Data and Analysis

The essay focuses on four key types of pragmatic presuppositions, the mutual knowledge and defeasibility of pragmatic presupposition, false pragmatic presupposition and clarified pragmatic presupposition, to analyze how humor is generated in talk shows like *The Tonight Show*. Each type plays a distinct role in creating humor. Also, three types of humor, including pun, satire and absurdity, will be discussed here to analyze the humor generation mechanism of different pragmatic presuppositions.

To better analyze the humor invoked by pragmatic presuppositions, the sample selection is based on several criteria. First, the appropriateness of sample size. The 21 episodes provides approximately 15 hours of material, yielding enough humor cases for qualitative analysis without overwhelming volume. Second, the diversity of humor invoked by different presupposition types. These episodes employ various types of pragmatic presuppositions and forms of humor. Third, representative audience interaction. These episodes feature frequent audience interactions (e.g., improv games, phone-ins), where the role of mutual knowledge in presuppositions is particularly evident.

2.1. Research Method and Data Collection

This study uses qualitative methods to analyze *The Tonight Show* and examines 21 episodes (Episode 58-78) of Season 9, concentrating on humorous lines that stem from pragmatic presupposition.

A textual analysis was conducted to discuss pragmatic presuppositions in talk shows, specifically in *The Tonight Show*. Besides, the paper involves some quantitative and qualitative analysis of data. Four types, including two characteristics and two presuppositions, and three types of humor, including one form-based humor types and two content-based humor types, are discussed here, with Table 1 giving definitions and examples of different types of pragmatic presuppositions and Table 2 illustrating definitions and examples of three humor types, in order to support the selection rules and criteria for materials and corresponding analysis.

Table 1. Types, definitions, and examples of presuppositions

Types	Definitions	Examples
Mutual Knowledge	Background knowledge shared by communication participants	A: Do you like the new clothes I bought yesterday? B: Yes, I love it.
Defeasibility	Disappearance of pragmatic presupposition when conflicting with common sense, background knowledge, or the content of the following statement in a specific case	A: Jane once had a vacation in Beijing. B: No, Jane has never been to Beijing.
Clarified Presupposition	The mention of common background knowledge	A: My cat is crying. B: Cats don't cry.
False Presupposition	The expression form of false text or the information content contained in false text	Earth is the center of the universe.

Table 2. Types, definitions, and examples of humor

Types	Definitions	Examples
Pun	Humor arising from phonological or semantic ambiguity	Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.
Satire	Using humor to critique societal issues	Pigs rewriting commandments: "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others."
Absurdity	Humor through illogical or surreal scenarios	"Why don't scientists trust atoms? Because they make up everything!"

All materials analyzed in this study were systematically selected according to rigorously defined rules and criteria to ensure methodological validity. The selection process was designed to maintain scientific objectivity while capturing the full spectrum of pragmatic presupposition applications in humor.

2.2. Data Analysis

After the manual examination of the samples, the frequency and distribution of four different types of pragmatic presuppositions and three different types of humor were found and presented in Table 3 and Table 4 below.

Table 3. Percentage of Four Types of Pragmatic Presuppositions in the sample

Types	Frequency	Percentage
Mutual Knowledge	5	31.25%
Defeasibility	4	25.00%
Clarified Presupposition	4	25.00%
False Presupposition	3	18.75%

Table 4. Percentage of Three Types of Humor in the sample

Types	Frequency	Percentage
Pun	3	18.75%
Satire	3	18.75%
Absurdity	10	62.5%

As is shown in the Table 3, the characteristics of mutual knowledge appeared more frequently than others, with the proportion of 32%. The characteristics of defeasibility and clarified presupposition took up 28%. And false presupposition accounted for 18%. Mutual knowledge is preferred since they are essential in influencing audience's interaction.

The Table 4 presents a clear breakdown of three humor categories—puns, satire, and absurdity—in a sample of 16 instances. The data reveals a significant disparity in their distribution, with absurdity emerging as the predominant form. Absurd humor constitutes the majority of the sample at 62.5%, which is more than three times as frequent as either puns or satire. This suggests that absurdity may be a more versatile or universally effective comedic technique in the given context. Its prevalence could be attributed to its reliance on illogical scenarios, which often transcend cultural and linguistic barriers, making it accessible to a broader audience. Both puns and satire account for 18.75% of the sample. Their equal but limited representation implies that these forms may be more context-specific or require a certain level of audience familiarity to achieve the desired humorous effect.

To further analyze the relations between pragmatic presuppositions and humor, the Table 5 presents frequency counts of four types of pragmatic presuppositions, including defeasibility, mutual knowledge, false presupposition, clarified presupposition, across three humor categories of absurdity, satire, pun.

Table 5. Frequency Counts of Four Types of Pragmatic Presuppositions across Three Humor Categories

Presupposition Humor Types	Mutual Knowledge	Defeasibility	Clarified Presupposition	False Presupposition
Pun	3	0	0	0
Satire	0	0	2	1
Absurdity	2	4	2	2

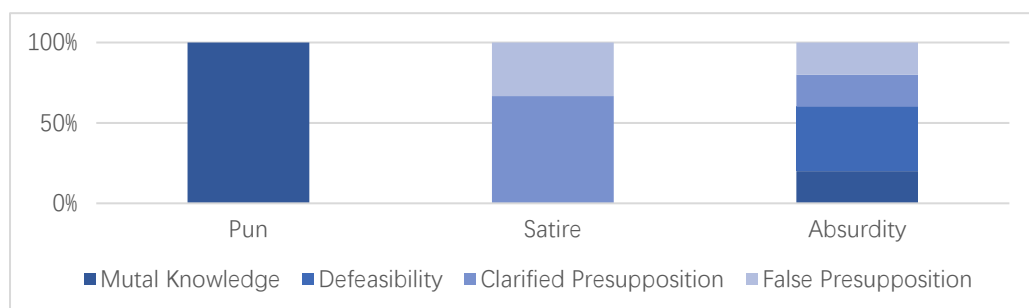


Figure 1. Distribution of Four Types of Pragmatic Presuppositions across Three Humor Categories (%)

According to Figure 1, puns demonstrate a singular dependence on mutual knowledge, with no occurrences of other presupposition types. This exclusive pattern underscores how puns fundamentally operate through shared linguistic understanding, requiring no logical contradictions their humorous

effects.

Satirical humor primarily utilizes two instances of clarified presuppositions and one instances of false presuppositions. This pattern reflects satire's critical nature, which often requires explicit framing and deliberate misrepresentation.

Absurdity emerges as the most versatile category, utilizing all four presupposition types. Notably, it shows the highest frequency of defeasibility (4 instances), which aligns with absurd humor's characteristic reliance on subverting expectations and logical contradictions. The equal distribution of mutual knowledge, false, and clarified presuppositions (2 instances each) further demonstrates absurdity's capacity to employ multiple comedic strategies simultaneously.

To sum up, these findings suggest that different humor types employ distinct cognitive and linguistic mechanisms to generate comedic effects, with mutual knowledge being the most preferred pragmatic presupposition trait to interact with audience and to invoke humor and absurdity being the most versatile or universally effective comedic technique in its presuppositional strategies.

2.3. Analysis of Materials

The following part will examine how humor emerges through applications of pragmatic presupposition, analyzing specific examples to demonstrate four key mechanisms.

2.3.1. Invoking Humor by Mutual Knowledge

Mutual knowledge is also called common sense or common ground. This means that prior action is premised on the information exchanged by the participants in the specific communication. If the speaker and the audience do not understand each other, the speaker cannot accurately convey the meaning of the conversation. As a result, the audience is unable to receive the information effectively. When there is a conflict with mutual knowledge, there is a barrier in verbal communication. As a result, there will be inconsistencies, resulting in humorous effects.

Example 1:

(Jimmy Fallon is wearing a helmet from the movie Peacemaker)

Jimmy Fallon: John, this is heavy, this is expensive, but I'm keeping this.

John Cena: No, I'm a man of my word. And technically, I don't own it, but it's yours.

Jimmy Fallon: So will I hear from lawyers?

John Cena: If you don't pick up the phone, you won't.

(2022-1-8)

This is a humorous dialogue based on a situational context, centered around the phrase "hear from", which also relates to the humor type, the pun, to be specific. In English, "hear from" is a phrase with dual meanings. It can denote the legal term as receiving lawsuits from lawyers or simply hearing words from ears. So here Jimmy Fallon refers to the first meaning, while John Cena refers to the second meaning.

About this conversation, Jimmy Fallon is wearing the peacemaker helmet from the movie, and he is so obsessed with it so he wants to keep the helmet. John Cena rejects him first by saying "No, I'm a man of my word." He indicates that he is a trustworthy person, and he would not steal from the movie crew, let alone send the helmet to Jimmy. But then to evoke the humorous atmosphere, he says "it's yours". When Jimmy hears the answer, he is worried if it is illegal of keeping the helmet without the permission from the movie crew. Then he asks John Cena "Will I hear from lawyers?", indicating that he doesn't want to illegally keep the helmet.

Here Jimmy Fallon presupposes keeping the helmet without permission of the owner may hear from the lawyer because Jimmy uses the phrase "hear from lawyer" as a legal term, defining as receiving lawsuit.

As two English native speakers, Jimmy Fallon and John Cena both know the meanings of the phrase "hear from". And clearly, John Cena understands the meaning that Jimmy Fallon intends to express.

However, John Cena purposely presupposes "hear from" as physically hear words from lawyers, deliberately misinterpreting the meaning as hearing words from lawyers, saying that "if you don't pick up the phone, you won't." Here he means that if you don't answer the phone calls, of course you won't hear any words from lawyers.

For the humor effect, when Jimmy Fallon was worried about the possibility of receiving a letter from a lawyer, it created a tense atmosphere, as often issues involving the ownership of items could lead to

legal disputes. However, John Cena's response, "If you don't pick up the phone, you won't." (which means you wouldn't hear the lawyer's words if you didn't pick up the phone) cleverly breaks the tension and has an unexpectedly humorous effect. What he implied was that even if Jimmy Fallon had received a letter from his lawyer, he wouldn't have heard anything about the issue as long as he chose not to answer the phone.

2.3.2. Invoking Humor by Defeasibility

If the pragmatic presupposition conflicts with common sense, background knowledge, or the content of the following statement in a specific case, the presupposition disappears. If the speaker adds some linguistic components to the previous statement, he will modify or delete the previous statement. Therefore, the previous presupposition will be cancelled. If the presupposition is not logical with the following words, humor may arise, and the original presumption will be cancelled.

Example 2:

Jimmy Fallon: Next up is a travel book. A lot of people are looking forward to just getting out there travelling, people who are looking to take the family road trip. Check this out here. This is called "Nuclear Heartland: A guide to the 1,000 missile silos of the United States". I can't wait. Let's look inside here. This one says, "A Family Outing," here. It says, "A Family Outing." "We sat, my wife, our three children, myself, and our dog. A few hundred feet away was a Minuteman missile tipped with a warhead containing an explosive force of 1.2 million tons of TNT. It hummed during the night."

(2022-2-1)

About this section, Jimmy Fallon is introducing some books, and this book that he was introducing right now is a travel book titled "Nuclear Heartland: A guide to the 1,000 missile silos of the United States." This book is evidently not a typical travel guide as it delves into the discussion of one thousand missile silos in the United States.

The presupposition from the title "A Family Outing" is that the travel is in the form of a family trip. Because it is common sense that a family trip should be suitable for both adults and kids, which means the travel atmosphere should be easy and especially safe.

But the presupposition is abolished because the content of the passage twists in an extremely unusual and dangerous scenario - camping a few hundred feet away from a Minuteman missile armed with a warhead containing 1.2 million tons TNT equivalent. The passage also mentions a sound background that "it hummed during the night." As known to all, a place with missiles and tons of explosives is dangerous, and there is no reason to travel to this kind of place with family. Therefore, it clearly abolishes the presupposition of an easy and safe family outing.

With the contradiction of the former presupposition, as well as the common sense, it creates absurdity and humor.

2.3.3. Invoking Humor by False Presupposition

False pragmatic presupposition can be understood not only as the expression form of false text, but also as the information content contained in false text itself. It refers to a form of expression in which language is used by a speaker to convey nonverbal intent. For example, a speaker may imply, mislead, or hide certain information so that the listener has a certain understanding or presupposition, which is not consistent with the actual situation, so as to achieve a certain purpose or intention of the speaker.

Example 3:

Jimmy Fallon: This week Twitter permanently banned Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene after she kept posting misinformation. But just because she got kicked off Twitter doesn't mean that she's posting on other sites. For instance, on LinkedIn, she posted: "I shouldn't be banned from anything! If you don't believe me, contact my references – Elvis, Scooby Doo, and JFK."

(2022-1-3)

About this section, Jimmy Fallon touched on a real news story - Twitter permanently banned Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene because she continued to post misinformation. This background information provides the context and premise for the next joke. Jimmy then raised a legitimate concern that even if Marjorie Taylor Greene is banned from Twitter, she could continue to post misinformation on other social media platforms. The concern is logical, because there are so many social media platforms, and banning one doesn't mean she can't have a voice elsewhere. Then Jimmy Fallon referred to a

LinkedIn post by Marjorie Taylor Greene.

The post from Marjorie presupposes that Elvis, Scooby Doo and JFK are her references, also indicates that these people are approachable. The post is trying to claim that she shouldn't be banned from any platform, and her "references" - Elvis, Scooby Doo and JFK, can persuade others into believing her. This clearly is a false pragmatic presupposition, because Elvis, Scooby Doo, and JFK are all famous dead people who obviously can't be references for anyone, much less endorse Marjorie Taylor Greene's misstatements.

False pragmatic presupposition has produced a strong humorous effect. It reveals in an absurd and false way how untenable Marjorie Taylor Greene's statements are.

2.3.4. Invoking Humor by Clarified Presupposition

Clarified pragmatic presupposition means that in the process of communication, the speaker explicitly and directly puts forward or implies a pre-set information or hypothesis as the basis for understanding and communication between the two sides. This kind of presupposition information is usually the background knowledge that both parties can understand and accept, which plays an important role in the understanding of discourse and the smooth progress of communication.

Example 4:

Jimmy Fallon: Apparently Netflix's plan is to take so much of our money that we'll have to enter a real-life squid game. Netflix says that you can either pay the increase or enjoy not knowing what anyone's talking about.

(2022-1-17)

In this section, Jimmy Fallon announced the Netflix's price hike strategy of increasing the membership fee, and exaggerated the increase to an extreme where Netflix would charge so much that people would have to participate in a "real-life squid game" (presumably a playful reference to the setting of the South Korean drama Squid Game, in which contestants must face life-and-death challenges).

Jimmy Fallon clarifies the presupposition that Netflix sells globally prevalent shows that people usually talk about, by saying that "you can choose to pay the price increase or enjoy not knowing what anyone is talking about." This illustrates the reason why the Netflix plans this hike strategy without too much worrying audience loss issues – they are too successful at becoming part of every person's life, as they sell TV shows with household names.

The humor comes when Jimmy Fallon added the presupposition "enjoy not knowing what anyone is talking about." Fallon clearly critiques Netflix's frequent price hikes and its cultural dominance, implying that the company exploits its monopoly over popular content to pressure subscribers, create stronger humor effect through satire.

3. Major Findings and Discussions

Presupposition significantly influences verbal humor creation, as demonstrated by the effective use in *The Tonight Show*. The humor based on pragmatic presupposition primarily serves to get the audience involved with the context delivered by the speaker and strengthen interactions between both parties in order to create the harmonious atmosphere and humor effects. The show frequently uses presupposition characteristics of mutual knowledge (31.25%) and employs defeasibility (25.00%), clarified presuppositions (25.00%) and false presuppositions (18.75%) to generate humor. Key findings indicate that the verbal humor in talk shows is influenced by pragmatic presupposition, with the characteristics of mutual knowledge being most prevalent, while false presupposition is least used. Also, the data demonstrates the prevalence of absurdity (62.5%), the humor type that is mostly invoked by pragmatic presuppositions.

4. Conclusion

The paper also has certain limitations, for it only discusses verbal humor from certain pragmatic characteristics and applications, so the analysis may not be perfect and comprehensive. As for future studies, it is suggested that a larger amount and greater diversity of data be collected to reveal a relatively more sufficient pattern. More importantly, an empirical investigation on whether the presuppositions in talk shows can create the same humor effect in both domestic and international context is expected to be

carried out.

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