

An Analysis of Entertainment Interviews From A Three-Dimensional Pragmatic Perspective: Interaction of Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory in The Ellen Degeneres Show

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Abstract. From the perspective of pragmatics, this study takes the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory as the theoretical framework to analyze the interactive mechanism of these three theories in interview content from the renowned American talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. The research shows that: (1)The “violation” of the Cooperative Principle often forms a dynamic balance with the “maintenance” of the Politeness Principle, achieving both communicativeness and humor; (2)The Speech Act Theory serves as a linguistic form carrier for the application of the Politeness Principle, effectively mitigating face-threatening acts; (3)The interaction of the three-dimensional theories reveals the pragmatic triangular relationship of “information-relationship-intention” in entertainment interviews. This study aims to provide a reference for the pragmatic analysis of entertainment interview shows and supplements a pragmatic perspective of the integration of the three theories. It also offers practical insights for creators of interview-based variety shows to harmonize entertainment value and relational dynamics.

Keywords: Pragmatics; *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*; entertainment interview shows; conversational analysis

1. Introduction:

In recent years, an increasing number of studies have begun to focus on the application of the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory in highly entertaining contexts such as sitcoms and talk shows. Research on how these theories jointly contribute to the generation of humorous effects and the realization of communicative functions has been continuously deepening. For instance, violating the “Maxim of Manner” of the Cooperative Principle often creates humor. The Politeness Principle supplements the social dimension of the Cooperative Principle, advocating for the alleviation of communicative conflicts through “face management” (Deutschmann, 2003). The Speech Act Theory emphasizes that language is not only used to convey information but also serves as a tool for “illocutionary acts.”

The renowned American entertainment talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* has attracted audiences worldwide with its relaxing and humorous style. Its success is inseparable from hostess Ellen’s ability to balance humor, respect, and information delivery. Therefore, the show serves as an ideal subject for studying entertaining language communication.

As an important supplement to the pragmatic research trends of entertainment interview programs, this study adopts the novel perspective of interactive mechanism among three major theories—the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory—to partially address the limitations of existing studies that mostly focus on a single theory. It provides pragmatic references for creators of interview-based variety shows to balance humor and communicative functions. Using specific content from *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* as research data, based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, this study aims to address the following three questions:

(1) In *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, how does the “violation” of the Cooperative Principle and the “maintenance” of the Politeness Principle achieve a dynamic balance, thereby achieving communicativeness and humor?

(2) In *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, how does Speech Act Theory provide linguistic form carriers for the application of the Politeness Principle, effectively mitigating face-threatening acts of the interviewees?

(3) In *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, how does the synergistic interaction of the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory construct an “information-relationship-intention” interactive framework in entertainment interviews?

2. Literature Review:

As a discipline that studies language use, pragmatics focuses on the generation and understanding of meaning in communication. This study takes the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), the Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983), and the Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) as the core theoretical frameworks, analyzes the American entertainment talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and explores how these three pragmatic theories collectively contribute to the generation of humorous effects and the realization of communicative functions. Consequently, the literature review mainly focuses on three aspects: the pragmatic application analysis of the three theories, the research on the pragmatic characteristics of entertainment talk shows, and the application of the interactive mechanism of the three theories in the pragmatic analysis of entertainment talk shows.

2.1. Pragmatic Application Analysis of the Three Theories

Pragmatic theories attach greater importance to language users (Wang Nan, 2014). The Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice (1975) emphasizes that successful communication requires following four basic maxims: the Maxim of Quantity requires making your contribution as informative as is required and do not make your contribution more informative than is required; the Maxim of Quality emphasizes trying to make your contribution one that is true; the Maxim of Relation focuses on the relevance of utterances to the current topic; and the Maxim of Manner concerns the perspicuousness and coherence of expression. These maxims collectively form the fundamental framework for effective communication. The Politeness Principle proposed by Leech (1983) consists of six maxims: the Tact Maxim requires minimizing cost to others; the Generosity Maxim advocates maximizing benefit to others; the Approbation Maxim encourages minimizing dispraise of others; the Modesty Maxim suggests minimizing praise of self; the Agreement Maxim emphasizes minimizing disagreement between self and other; and the Sympathy Maxim focuses on maximizing sympathy between self and other. The two principles together constitute the pragmatic foundation of interpersonal communication: the Cooperative Principle ensures the efficiency of information delivery, while the Politeness Principle guarantees the harmony of the communication process. However, Wang Jinling (2002) argued that deliberate violations of the Cooperative Principle can enhance communicativeness and create humor. In his subsequent research, Leech proposed the Politeness Principle, suggesting that people violate the Cooperative Principle out of politeness considerations. In specific communication scenarios, speakers often need to seek a dynamic balance between these two principles to achieve effective and appropriate communication results. The Speech Act Theory of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) explains how people use language to convey implicatures and perform various speech acts (Miao Xingwei, 1999). Numerous studies have shown that the application of the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory in different contexts provides profound theoretical support for language communication. However, existing researches on pragmatic theories mainly focus on exploring specific utterances in specific situations (Ban Zhenlin, 1999), and there is still a lack of attention to their crucial role in achieving communicative effects and humorous functions. Therefore, many studies have attempted to address the limitations of existing researches. Zhang Yangrui (2013) explored the comedic effects generated by violations of the Cooperative Principle in *2 Broke Girls*, verifying that deliberate violations of the Cooperative Principle can create humor. Lianming Li (2023) investigated how violations of the Cooperative Principle can create humorous effects that make audiences laugh. In service industry dialogues, it has been found that the “Approbation Maxim” and “Modesty Maxim” can effectively

reduce conflicts. Malasari & Rosdiana (2024) explored that praise is the most common expressive speech act, followed by boasting. These expressive speech acts help establish relationships between the two parties in a conversation and create an atmosphere that attracts the audience.

The main strength of existing researches lies in its attempt to explore how the three pragmatic theories help balance the communicative and humorous functions of conversations. However, most existing studies focus on a single pragmatic theory or combinations of two theories, lacking systematic three-dimensional interactive analysis. To follow this research trend and address this limitation, this study aims to use the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory as major theories to analyze the interview content of the well-known American talk show *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, and examine the coordinated effects of these three theories, in order to explore how they jointly contribute to the generation of humorous effects and the realization of communicative functions.

2.2. Research on the Pragmatic Characteristics of Entertainment Talk Shows

As a type of professional discourse, entertainment interview shows integrate the characteristics of “interviewing” and “talking” and have a performative nature (Dai Shulan, 2009). In recent years, an increasing number of studies have focused on the pragmatic phenomena in entertainment interview shows, aiming to provide references for the pragmatic analysis of such entertainment shows. Many recent studies have centered on the generation mechanism of humorous effects in entertainment interview shows. In *Tonight’s 80s Talk Show*, the host Wang Zijian often creates humor by suddenly deviating from the guest’s topic. For example, when the guest mentions high work pressure, the host turns to tease the guest’s appearance, generating unexpected humorous effects. In *Saturday Night Live*, the host often achieves absurd effects by providing redundant information.

Hosts need to dynamically coordinate between information exploring and interpersonal relationships, strategically using indirect speech acts to reduce threatening levels. For instance, Jimmy Fallon, the host of *The Tonight Show*, frequently uses polite strategies such as requests and promises to draw the distance close with guests (Pang & Wang, 2023). In *A Date with Lu Yu*, the hostess reduces the guest’s psychological burden by using “empathetic presupposition” and “social value assignment” when asking about the guest’s divorce experience, reducing the sharpness of the sensitive questions. Additionally, an analysis of *Happy Camp* reveals that hosts divert attention through self-deprecation so as to relieve guests’ pressure, and enhance the audiences’ tolerance towards the interviewees.

Barrages, laughter, and other elements consist of the audiences’ “pragmatic feedback” loop. The host of *Rock & Roast* adjusts topics according to real-time barrages, enhancing the audiences’ sense of participation. Non-verbal symbols can dynamically reinforce pragmatic effects, such as the host using frowning and “Sympathy Maxim” to strengthen the emotional resonance with the audience.

The main strength of previous researches lies in analyzing the pragmatic features of entertainment interview shows from three aspects: the mechanism of humor generation, the balance between information acquisition and interpersonal relationships, and the synergy of audience interaction and multimodal collaboration. Based on case studies, the common pragmatic characteristics of entertainment interview shows have been summarized. This study follows this trend and takes *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* as an example, combining three major theories to analyze its pragmatic features, which will provide insights for the pragmatic analysis of entertainment interview shows.

2.3. Application of the Interactive Mechanism of the Three Theories in the Pragmatic Analysis of Entertainment Talk Shows

In recent years, some studies have focused on applying the interactive mechanism of the three major theories of pragmatics to the pragmatic analysis of entertainment interview shows.

2.3.1. “Violation” of the Cooperative Principle and “Maintenance” of the Politeness Principle

As an important means of communication, humor, with its unique ability to make people laugh, has become an effective form of interpersonal interaction. According to its forms of expression, humor can be classified into two major types: situational humor and verbal humor. Traditional pragmatics holds that the violation of the Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975) is an important source of humor, but entertainment interviews also need to maintain interpersonal relationships. Culpeper (2005) proposed that humor is often achieved by violating the Cooperative Principle, but the Politeness Principle is required to maintain harmony. In *Kangxi Talk Show*, the hosts often violate the Maxim of Quality of Cooperative Principle but then immediately resort to the Approbation Maxim of the Politeness Principle, creating a humorous rhythm. In addition, in *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, Ellen makes the audiences laugh by violating the Maxim of Quantity deliberately of the Cooperative Principle and then uses the Sympathy Maxim of the Politeness Principle to alleviate the discomfort of the guests.

2.3.2. The Speech Act Theory Provides Linguistic Form Carriers for the Application of the Politeness Principle.

The Speech Act Theory provides a linguistic form carrier for the Politeness Principle, while the Politeness Principle is employed to regulate the implementation methods of speech acts and mitigate face-threatening acts. Brown & Levinson (1987) proposed that “face-threatening acts” need to be mitigated through polite strategies, which are closely associated with the indirect speech acts of the Speech Act Theory. In *Media Talk: Conversation Analysis and the Study of Broadcasting*, Hutchby (2006) pointed out that talk show hosts often adopt exaggerated praise and humorous teasing to balance the coerciveness of directives. In *Tonight’s 80s Talk Show*, the host reduces the pressure on guests through “indirectives” and polite tones. When analyzing entertainment interview shows, it has been observed that hosts frequently use presupposed consensus to reduce the abruptness of directives and minimize the sense of imposition on guests.

2.3.3. Construction of the “Information-Relationship-Intention” Interactive Mechanism

The Cooperative Principle, the Politeness Principle, and the Speech Act Theory have constructed the pragmatic interactive mechanism of “information-relationship-intention”, ensuring effective information delivery through the Cooperative Principle, maintaining interpersonal relationships through the Politeness Principle, and achieving specific communicative intentions through the Speech Act Theory. Together, these three elements form the core framework of entertainment interview shows (Dai Shulan, 2009). In *Roundtable Talks*, the host conveys information through declarative speech acts and Agreement Maxim of the Politeness Principle, while maintaining the guests’ dignity and intentions to evoke emotional resonance. Sifianou (1992) believes that in the British interview program *The Graham Norton Show*, the host often violates the Cooperative Principle by using irony and self-deprecation to create humorous effects, but maintains the interpersonal relationships through the “Sympathy Maxim” in the Politeness Principle, ultimately achieving the communicative intention. In summary, the studies aforementioned imply that the interactive mechanism of Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory is often applied in the pragmatic analysis of entertainment interview shows. At the same time, the interactive mechanism of these three theories also provides a theoretical basis for this research.

3. Case Study:

The “violation” of the Cooperative Principle often forms a dynamic balance with the “maintenance” of the Politeness Principle, achieving both communicativeness and humor.

Example 1: Deliberately violate of the Maxim of Quality in the Cooperative Principle, then compensate by maintaining the Approbation Maxim in the Politeness Principle.

During an interview with Justin Bieber in 2015, Ellen said:

Ellen: So, you're dating Selena again? Wait—is this the fifth or sixth time? I've lost count!

Ellen: But honestly, you two are the Romeo and Juliet of pop music. Just don't die at the end!

Analysis: When asking questions, Ellen deliberately violated the Maxim of Quality. She knew well that the statement of “the fifth or sixth time” lacked solid evidence. By making exaggerated and false statements, she created ironic humor, subtly suggesting the instability of the relationship between the two. The violation of the Maxim of Quality was not a communicative error but a strategic pragmatic violation to resonate with the audiences. Subsequently, she immediately compensated by applying the Approbation Maxim in the Politeness Principle. By comparing Bieber and Selena to Romeo and Juliet so as to elevate their relationship, thereby softening the sarcasm of the previous statements and satisfying the guests' positive face needs, demonstrating the pragmatic mediation ability of talk show hosts. As Searle's (1969) Speech Act Theory suggests, Ellen's initial questions simultaneously performed “assertive” and “expressive” acts, while the subsequent remedies enhanced the “expressive” function. In this way, it not only maintained the entertainment value of the show but also conformed to the politeness framework of television interviews.

Example 2: Deliberately violate of the Maxim of Quantity in the Cooperative Principle, then compensate by maintaining the Sympathy Maxim in the Politeness Principle.

In 2015, when interviewing Malala, Ellen said:

Ellen: You met Obama, the Queen, wrote a book, won a Nobel Prize.....Do you even have time to watch Frozen? Do you sing Let It Go in the shower?

Violation: After listing a series of Malala's achievements, Ellen suddenly shifted to a rather childish question about the details of an animated film, creating humor but simultaneously creating a gap of “information overload - cognitive degradation”. This kind of questioning had a certain discontinuity and incoherence, violating the Maxim of Quantity in the Cooperative Principle, as the information in the discourse violates “informativeness”. This deconstructed the label “child prodigy” for Malala, suggesting that she lacked the life experience of ordinary teenagers.

Ellen: Giving Elsa dolls and singing “You're changing the world, but never lose your inner Elsa!”

Maintenance: After deliberately violating the Maxim of Quantity, Ellen achieved a dynamic balance by maintaining the Sympathy Maxim of the Politeness Principle. By giving Elsa dolls and singing with Malala, she built an emotional connection with her. Malala eventually laughed and hugged Ellen, indicating the release of her inner pressure.

In conclusion, Ellen used the medium of giving dolls to strengthen the remedial effect of the Politeness Principle. She created humor through information overload and cleverly resolves it through the empathic strategies, thus achieving the unity of the humorous and communicative functions.

The Speech Act Theory serves as a linguistic form carrier for the application of the Politeness Principle, effectively mitigating face-threatening acts.

Example 1: During the interview with Michelle Obama

Ellen: As the First Lady, you must have faced countless impossible choices...Would you share just one lesson that still guides you?

Michelle: That's such a thoughtful framing...It's about finding strength in vulnerability.

Analysis: In the dialogue, Ellen uses the interrogative sentence “Would you share.....” to request information, which is a typical “request act” aimed at obtaining information. The use of the honorific title “First Lady” and the soothing phrase “countless impossible choices” praises the Michelle Obama's social status and experiences, following the Tact Maxim and Approbation Maxim in the Politeness Principle. This reduces the intrusion of the questions and indirectly satisfies the positive face of the other person. The question is highly open-ended, avoiding imposing an answer, which gives Michelle choices, thus reducing the threat brought about by negative face. Michelle expresses

her personal views through the declarative sentence “It’s about.....”, which is an “assertive act”. “That’s such a thoughtful framing” praises and approves Ellen’s way of asking questions, adhering to the Agreement Maxim in the Politeness Principle and maintaining Ellen’s positive face. “Finding strength in vulnerability” not only answers the question but also appropriately avoids revealing sensitive details, following the Modesty Maxim in the Politeness Principle. In short, the two parties respectively use “request acts” and “assertive acts” to obtain information and convey opinions, forming the basis of communication. They also use the Tact Maxim and Approbation Maxim in the Politeness Principle to reduce potential face-threatening acts. Ellen avoids making the questions offensive while Michelle avoids appearing overly defensive in her answer, thus maintaining a relatively positive communicative relationship between the two.

Example 2: During the interview with Jennifer Aniston

Ellen: Rumor has it there’s a special someone...But you know I’d never pry, unless you feel like enlightening us?

Jennifer: You’re the only one I’d consider telling!

Analysis: In the dialogue between the two, Ellen conveys gossip information indirectly through the “assertive speech act” “Rumor has it”, suggesting the existence of rumors. Ellen first states “never pry”, actively reducing the offensiveness of the questions and avoiding direct infringement on the guest’s privacy, which conforms to the Tact Maxim in the Politeness Principle. The second part of the sentence “unless you feel like enlightening us?” belongs to the “interrogative speech act”, expressed in a conditional form to ask politely, seemingly not forcing Jennifer to answer and giving the initiative to her, which conforms to the Agreement Maxim of Politeness Principle. Jennifer shows her trust in Ellen through the “expressive speech act” “the only one I’d consider telling”, adhering to the Approbation Principle of Politeness Principle. By placing Ellen in a special position, Jennifer implicitly expresses her trust and respect for Ellen, thus strengthening the relationship between the two. To sum up, Ellen uses the speech act structure of “assertion + inquiry” as a linguistic form carrier for the Politeness Principle, and uses the conditional sentence “unless you feel like...” to ease the face-threatening effects caused by the questions. Correspondingly, Jennifer does not directly respond to the rumors, but establishes an emotional connection with Ellen through the Approbation Maxim of Politeness Principle, which not only protects her privacy but also indirectly maintains her own face.

The synergistic interaction of the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory construct an “information-relationship-intention” interactive framework.

Example: During the interview with Taylor Swift

Ellen: Lover is your seventh studio album...you wrote this album faster than I write grocery lists?

Taylor: No! It took years!

Analysis: Ellen’s claim that Taylor “wrote the album faster than I write grocery lists” violates the Maxim of Quality in the Cooperative Principle. By exaggerating the facts, she creates entertaining information to achieve humorous effects. However, Taylor’s “assertive speech act”, which provides the actual writing duration, balances humor and facts, thus realizing the unity of humor and communicativeness. Although Ellen’s question implies teasing about Taylor’s hasty creation, the phrase “faster than I write grocery lists” is highly colloquial and of great lifelization, weakening the aggressiveness of the question and avoiding offense to a certain extent, which conforms to the Tact Maxim in the Politeness Principle. In addition, Taylor’s response adheres to the Agreement Maxim in the Politeness Principle. Although she explicitly denies the statement, she maintains a friendly attitude. It can be seen that the Tact Maxim and Agreement Maxim in the Politeness Principle reduce the threats to the guests’ dignities caused by the teasing to a certain extent. Ellen attracts the audiences’ attention and promotes interaction through the exaggerated assertion “faster than writing grocery lists,” while reducing the face threat to Taylor Swift by adhering to the Tact Maxim in the Politeness Principle. Taylor responds in a relaxed manner and corrects the facts through an “assertive speech

act”, balancing the facts and the humorous effects to achieve a balance between humor and communicative functions. The Speech Act Theory in this dialogue realizes dual intentions: entertaining the audiences while maintaining the guest’s image. Therefore, the dialogue between Taylor Swift and Ellen constructs an interactive framework of “information-relationship-intention” by creating humor while ensuring the guest’s psychological comfort.

4. Conclusion:

Through analysis of specific interview contents from *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, this study finds that the hostess Ellen frequently creates humorous effects by deliberately violating the Maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner in the Cooperative Principle. Simultaneously, she maintains communicative harmony and positive interaction by sticking to the Politeness Principle, thus achieving a dynamic balance between communicativeness and humor. The Speech Act Theory provides a linguistic form carrier for the application of the Politeness Principle. Ellen frequently uses “illocutionary acts” in interviews, combining them with positive politeness strategies to build relationships with guests, enhance friendliness, and reduce dignity threats to guests, thereby demonstrating the nest relationship between the Speech Act Theory and the Politeness Principle. The Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory form a synergistic pragmatic triangular relationship in *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*. The Cooperative Principle provides a basic framework for information exchange, enabling effective communication between the host and guests while achieving humorous functions; the Politeness Principle supplements the social dimension of the Cooperative Principle, aiming to construct harmonious communicative relationships; and the Speech Act Theory endows linguistic acts with specific functions. The synergistic effect of these three major theories not only realizes the humorous effects of entertainment interview shows but also achieves the dual goals of information delivery and relationship maintenance.

This study aims to provide references for the pragmatic analysis of entertainment interview shows. Through systematical examination on the synergistic effects of the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle, and Speech Act Theory, it has expanded the application scope of these theories in entertaining contexts, seeking to supplement new perspectives for pragmatic research on entertainment interview shows. Meanwhile, for creators of entertainment interview shows, this study can help them achieve integration between humorous and communicative functions in interview question design, effectively enhancing audiences appeal.

Despite its achievements, this study still has several limitations. On the one hand, it predominantly uses qualitative analysis to interpret specific conversational fragments from *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* without incorporating quantitative statistics, making it difficult to objectively measure the actual effects of certain pragmatic strategies. On the other hand, the study focuses merely on analyzing the conversational contents of *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* through the synergistic mechanism of the three pragmatic theories, without addressing paralinguistic factors. Additionally, due to differences in pragmatic habits and cultural backgrounds, the applicability of the study’s conclusions requires further verification. Therefore, it is necessary to specifically explore how to appropriately adjust strategies across different cultural landscapes.

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