

# A Study of Verbal Humor in *This is Going to Hurt* from the Perspective of Pragmatic Presupposition

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## 1. Introduction

English comedy's humor often fades in Chinese translation, affecting plot understanding and highlighting the need for verbal humor analysis. Verbal humor, common in dialogue, gestures, and expressions, has seen research shift from Psychology and Philosophy to Pragmatics. Linguists apply pragmatic theories to various media, but British comedy's unique humor is under-researched. This paper will study verbal humor in the British comedy "This is Going to Hurt," aiming to understand the influence of pragmatic presupposition on its humor and its characteristics.

## 2. Theoretical Foundation

### 2.1 Verbal Humor

#### 2.1.1 Previous Studies of Verbal Humor in English Comedian works

In the '80s, domestic humor studies started from a linguistic viewpoint, differing from international approaches. Tan's '97 humor classification 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 (2018) pinpointed the Cooperative Principle, Conversational Implicature, and Pragmatic Presupposition as key in pragmatics. Zhang (2011) and Zhou (2016) examined verbal humor in sitcoms like "The Big Bang Theory" and "Two Broke Girls," investigating humor mechanisms and their educational relevance. Most research centers on classic American sitcoms, neglecting contemporary and British content. Some researchers, such as Quan and Yang (2021) with "Why Women Kill" and Zheng (2021) with a British drama, are diversifying materials, but British comedy analysis remains limited.

### 2.2 Pragmatic Presupposition

#### 2.2.1 Definition

Pragmatic presupposition, a concept introduced by Frege in 1892 and later developed by Stalnaker in the 1970s, is a type of presupposition that relates to the speaker's intent, context, and shared knowledge. Chinese linguist He Ziran defines it as the mutual assumptions for speech acts, while Huang sees it as a belief presumed true by the speaker.

#### 2.2.2 Properties

Pragmatic presupposition includes seven key aspects: appropriateness, defeasibility, unidirectionality, implicitness, mutual knowledge, subjectivity, and adaptability. Appropriateness refers to logically and contextually inferring presuppositions for effective communication. Defeasibility allows presuppositions to evolve with dialogue, shaped by the speaker's stance and purpose. Unidirectionality means presuppositions originate with the speaker before the listener recognizes them. Implicitness requires listeners to derive meaning from context. Mutual knowledge relies on shared information among conversationalists. Subjectivity involves personal factors in forming and interpreting presuppositions. Adaptability entails speakers altering presuppositions to achieve specific goals in a given context.

#### 2.2.3 Previous Studies of Verbal Humor based on Pragmatic Presupposition

Pragmatic presupposition is central in humor research, with global scholars studying it within different pragmatic theories. Foreign research, starting earlier, has explored humor in broader theoretical contexts, such as Seth's use of Leech's theory on Ghanaian comedy and Alvaro's work on Woody Allen films with conversational maxims. Domestic studies, initiated by Kang, have progressed to specific methods like Jiang's crosstalk humor analysis. Recent works include Tan's "Talk Show Conference" analysis with Kempson's classification, Yang, Cao et al.'s cognitive pragmatic view on humor discourse, Liu's "Modern Family" study on defeasibility, appropriateness, and mutual knowledge, and Yang's "Good Luck Charlie" research based on Chen Xinren's classification. Li analyzed "Desperate Housewives" using Wei Zaijiang's and Chen Xinren's classifications. While most scholars focus on the core properties of pragmatic presupposition in humor, fewer examine a wider range.

### 3. Research Data and Analysis

#### 3.1 A Brief Introduction to *This is Going to Hurt*

Adam, an obstetrician-gynecologist, faces challenges at work including poor equipment, understaffing, and excessive overtime, along with high patient expectations. He has close friends like intern Shruti and a long-term partner, Harry, whom he hasn't introduced to his family because of his sexual orientation. A diagnostic error caused a premature birth and the baby's death. The series follows Adam's growth in his career and personal life, blending humor with emotional depth. The writer uses pragmatic presupposition to craft humorous dialogue, making it analytically interesting.

#### 3.2 Research Method and Data Collection

This study uses qualitative methods to analyze the British drama "This is Going to Hurt," focusing on its realistic plot and character interactions. The research examines all seven episodes of the series, concentrating on humorous lines that stem from pragmatic presupposition. These instances are cataloged in an Excel spreadsheet, identifying key phrases and their corresponding episodes. Out of 78 humorous dialogues, 56 were found to be based on pragmatic presupposition, highlighting the influence of seven presupposition properties. The study concludes that humor in the drama is mainly conveyed through appropriateness and implicitness, with mutual knowledge playing a significant role.

**Table 1. Proportion of Each Property**

	Appropriateness	Subjectivity	Mutual Knowledge	<u>Defeasibility</u>	Adaptability	<u>Unidirectionality</u>	Implicitness
Quantity	18	7	9	5	3	4	10
Percentage	32.1%	12.5%	16.1%	8.9%	5.4%	7.1%	17.9%

#### 3.3 Data Analysis

##### 3.3.1 Appropriateness and Verbal Humor

Appropriateness means that pragmatic presupposition should be inferred based on logic and context to make sure the smooth progress of communication. Yet speaker s or hearers sometimes go against appropriateness, intentionally or unintentionally, and make the utterance that is opposite to the other person's presupposition. Humor thus arises.

Sample:

Dr. Houghton: *...By the time you retire, there's going to be a bus load of dead babies with your name on it. If you can't handle that fact, maybe you should get out now... **You need to decide, number one, do you really want to be doing this? And more importantly number two, are we going to get another glass of limoncello in, or what?***

(episode 4)

Shruti expresses feeling overwhelmed at work to Dr.Houghton, who advises her to consider changing jobs if she can't cope. When Shruti expects a second piece of advice, Dr. Houghton unexpectedly mentions limoncello, creating verbal humor. The conversation uses the concept of appropriateness to generate humor, highlighting the NHS's issues with excessive workload and inadequate staff training.

##### 3.3.2 Defeasibility and Verbal Humor

Defeasibility refers to that pragmatic presupposition changes according to utterance and context. The speaker makes presupposition and intentionally guides the hearer accept it, which the speaker will later make some addition or modification to, thus creating humorous effects.

Sample:

Emma: *Incredible. Thank you so much. Best wedding gift bar none...Well **until the main presents arrives in a few weeks.***

Sample:

Adam: *Of course. When are you due?*

Emma: *Oh no I meant the Maserati from Greg. It's got held up in Bologna.*

(episode 7)

Adam gives a wedding gift to Emma, Greg's wife, who calls it the best ever. She then adds a condition about a future gift, negating her initial statement. The conversation showcases the use of defeasibility, initially persuading Adam, but Emma's follow-up undermines the presupposition, creating humor.

### 3.3.3 Unidirectionality and Verbal Humor

Unidirectionality means that pragmatic presupposition can only be understood by the speaker unless the hearer figure it out or the speaker guide the hearer to comprehend the presupposition. But sometimes the speaker keep on communicating without further explaining the presupposition, leaving the hearer confused. Humorous effects are therefore generated.

Sample:

*Adam: Who's up then?*

*Shruti: Um...The MOB in bed 17.*

*Adam: MOB?*

*Shruti: Miserable old bat. Is that a good one?*

(episode 2)

In a hospital, time is crucial and doctors often use abbreviations. Shruti assumes Adam will understand her term "MOB" without further explanation, but he doesn't, leading to confusion and humor. Shruti must clarify, which is also funny. The humor comes from Shruti's unique abbreviation and her surprising explanation. Despite not receiving new staff training, Shruti adapts by using abbreviations like others, even if she makes mistakes. The story also shows that doctors in UK public hospitals are so busy that new interns must self-train.

## 4. Results and Discussion

Pragmatic presupposition significantly influences verbal humor creation, as demonstrated by the effective use in "This is Going to Hurt." The drama frequently breaks the appropriateness rule (32.1%) and employs implicitness (17.9%) and mutual knowledge dependency (16.1%) to generate humor, reflecting British culture. British humor, characterized by its emphasis on subtlety and puns, is evident in the series, which also showcases the personalities of its characters, uncovers underlying realities, and aids plot progression. Less common are adaptability (5.4%) and unidirectionality (7.1%), which are also culturally influenced.

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1 Major Findings

This study examines verbal humor in the British drama "This is Going to Hurt," focusing on its relation to pragmatic presupposition and its characteristics. It seeks to understand the generative process, features, and effects of such humor. Key findings indicate that the drama's verbal humor is influenced by pragmatic presupposition, with the properties of appropriateness and implicitness being most prevalent, while adaptability is least used. These properties' frequencies correlate with cultural context. The humor based on pragmatic presupposition primarily serves to define characters, advance the plot, and highlight social issues.

### 5.2 Implications and Limitations

The paper suggests two implications. First, verbal humor is closely related to pragmatic presupposition, which can aid in understanding humor in English comedy and assist writers in creating diverse comic works. Second, research on verbal humor should extend beyond American drama to include British humor, which differs significantly and warrants analysis from multiple perspectives.

### 5.3 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Study

This paper examines verbal humor in "This is Going to Hurt" through pragmatic presupposition, aiming to contribute to existing research. It is limited by subjective data collection and classification, suggesting a need for more objective methods, such as broader participation or the use of materials with canned laughter. Additionally, the study relies heavily on the work of one British comedian, which does not encompass the full range of British verbal humor. Future research should incorporate a wider variety of sources for a more comprehensive understanding.

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