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## Designing and Validating a Persian Humor Comprehension Test (PHCT) on the Basis of Grice's Conversational Maxims

Morteza Amirshuibani

Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Mohammad Ghazanfari

Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Reza Pishghadam

Department of English Language and Literature, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

### Abstract

*There currently exists no reliable or validated tool for the assessment of humor comprehension test in Persian language. Since information about test characteristics is crucial to determining the accuracy and fairness of scores from a test, the current study aimed to evaluate a comprehension test which claims to measure native and non-native Persian speakers' humor understanding. To this end, a 28 item test was developed from among a variety of Persian textbooks based on their flouting from Grice's four maxims namely, quality, quantity, manner, and relation. The Persian Humor Comprehension Test (PHCT) was administered to 180 Persian native speakers who were randomly selected in a language institute in Tabas, Iran. Data analysis included construct validity via confirmatory factor analysis, and factors were regressed onto observed covariates for the interpretation of the constructs. Reliability was estimated through Cronbach alpha. Analysis of test reliability revealed that PHCT enjoys an acceptable reliability index over .80 and the validity property with regards to the Grice's maxim provided a good fit for the data. Therefore, PHCT can be utilized for native speakers of Persian to check their comprehension of humor. PHCT also paves the way for the development of such tests for non-native speakers of Persian since humor-driven context of teaching is among the goals of humanistic approach and technology-enhanced learning.*

**Key words:** 1. Psychometric characteristics, 2. Persian Humor Comprehension Test, 3. Grice's maxims, 4. Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

### Introduction

Unlike the other branches of linguistics, pragmatics has been just added in linguistic list. In the 1970's, on the other hand, pragmatic was a vital element in linguistic thinking. Since that time, a lot of research studies have been done in the field of pragmatics. It is defined as "the study of the meaning of linguistic utterances for their users and interpreters" (Thomas, 1995, p. 173).

People do not always say what they mean and they often provide implicit description of their intention. It is often the case that the intended message does not equal the literal meaning of the words used. Individuals can mean something just different from what their words say, even just the opposite (Thomas, 1995). Therefore, it is the readers/hearers' responsibility to fill in the missing information. Such questions as what knowledge do people use to interpret what they read or hear? how do people manage to understand each other? And many other issues are dealt with in the area of linguistics known as pragmatics.

Research on pragmatics can be dated back to ancient Greece and Rome where the term pragmaticus' is found in late Latin and pragmaticos' in Greek, both meaning of being practical'. Modern use and current practice of pragmatics is credited to the influence of the American philosophical doctrine of pragmatism. The pragmatic interpretation of semiotics and verbal communication studies in Foundations of the Theory of Signs by Morris (1938). For Morris, pragmatics studies the relations of signs to interpreters, while semantics studies the relations of signs to the objects to which the signs are applicable, and syntax studies the formal relations of signs to one another.' By elaborating the sense of pragmatism in his concern of conversational meanings, Grice (1975) enlightened modern treatment of meaning by

distinguishing two kinds of meaning, natural and non-natural. Grice suggested that pragmatics should center on the more practical dimension of meaning, namely the conversational meaning which was later formulated in a variety of ways (Levinson, 1983; Leech, 1983).

Grice's conversational implicature has been one of influential pragmatic theories up to now. According to Grice, "utterances can make meanings based on what is implicated referring to some assumptions to the particular utterance. What is implicated is formulated logically by what Grice (1975 p.45), calls "implicatures or conversational implicatures." Meaning is actually realized from the situation of some utterances while "Grice's theory of implicature is concerned with the ways in which meaning can be communicated not only by what is said, but also by how it is said" (Levinson, 1983 p. 97).

According to Grice (1975), people communicate in a way to work together to provide mutually desired information and use utterances to maintain social relationship. Grice proposed it as cooperative principles which are essential for those who want to produce and analyze the conversations logically. According to him, "in a conversation, logically a speaker and a hearer should have cooperation by using four maxims, i.e., maxim of quality, quantity, relevance and manner in order that one can understand what other means" (Grice, 1975 p.45). If the utterances do not contain one of the maxims, they will not be understood by the hearer. These maxims are named cooperative principles.

Humor is a familiar phenomenon that most people experience daily, but which is difficult to understand or explain. Humor is a complex and dynamic mode of communication that serves a number of important social functions. The ability to appreciate, comprehend and produce humor is a critical and necessary skill set for full fluency in English (Strawhorn, 2014). According to Twain (1907), "English humor is hard to appreciate, though, unless you are trained to it."

According to Raskin (1985), humor competence is another faculty of human which differs from linguistic competence. To be able to acquire successfully the linguistic competence in a second language cannot guarantee the acquisition of L2 humor competence. Applied linguists have come to seriously reconsider the role of humor playing for L2 learners. Schmitz (2002) contends that in addition to making classes more enjoyable, the use of humor in foreign language courses can contribute to improving students' proficiency. For instance, the use of humor in English in EFL classes can contribute to thought-provoking (Deneire, 1995). Many other studies have shown that humor can help facilitate L2 development (e.g. Cook 2000; Sullivan, 2000; Bell 2005).

Although there have been many studies that integrated or suggested an integration of humor or English jokes into EFL classes, teaching English humor directly on its own or teachability of English humor is still a challenging question. Some predictable difficulties that prevent EFL learners to comprehend and, thus, appreciate English humor seem to include the lack of knowledge of culture and vocabulary (Jaroenkitboworn, 2015).

Attardo (1993) believes that humors involve the violation of (at least) one maxim of the cooperative principles. Mastery of grammar and vocabulary is often not enough for foreign speakers to be able to make decisions about appropriateness of word choices or interpretation of sentences containing humor. An argument can be made that this is a result of the fact that the most students learn and most teachers teach through an overly heavy reliance on textbooks. These textbooks are the center around which lessons are organized but provide very little information on humorous texts.

## Literature Review

In a study, Chadafi (2014) examined the floats of Grice's conversational maxims in "1001 Jokes" humor book. Chadafi (2014)'s study aimed (1) to describe types of Grice's conversational maxims frequently floated in "1001 Jokes" humor book, (2) to describe the implicature found in "1001 Jokes" humor book, and (3) to describe the maxim floats lead to funny jokes in "1001 Jokes" humor book. The writer employed a descriptive qualitative approach to each the findings. In collecting data, the researcher used documentation method, and to analyze data the writer referred to Grice's cooperative principle theory.

Based on 30 data analyzed in this study obtained from "1001 Jokes" humor book, the researcher concluded that (1) 21 of the data or 70% float maxim of quality, 4 of data or 13.33% float maxim of manner, 3 of the data or 10% float maxim of quantity, 1 of the data or 3.33% floats maxim of relevance,

and 1 of the data or 3.33% floats all maxims. Then, from the implicature the researcher found that (2) scalar implicature was to show contrast meanings between an utterance to other one, generalized conversational implicature was to explain the utterances used in the *"1001 Jokes"* humor book that did not need a special context to have humorous meaning, particularized conversational implicature was to demonstrate the utterances needing a specific context to have humorous meanings, and scalar implicature was to describe the joke utterances that have degree of meaning. Afterwards, the researcher concluded that (3) there were two aspects making the maxim floats lead to funny jokes in *"1001 Jokes"* humor book, i.e., relief, and incongruity of the word or the lexis. Besides that the writer also found that the floats of all maxims make a strong surprising meaning of the joke utterances increasing the degree of funny.

In another study, Triyatun (2013) described the types of non-observance maxims, and the intentions of non-observance maxims. The type of this research was descriptive qualitative research which the researcher used documentation method as the method of collecting data. The data of this research were dialogues which contain non-observance maxims that were found in *The Death of Salesman* drama script. The result of the findings showed that firstly, the types of non-observance in *The Death of a Salesman* drama script used by the characters were flouting of maxims, violating of maxims and suspending of maxims. Secondly, the speaker's intentions of non-observance maxims were requesting, suggesting, alerting, warning, refusing, and disagreement utterance.

Palupi (2006) studied the types of humor appeared in the comedy film *Friends*, in the episode of *"The One With That Could Have Been"* and its relation to Grice's Maxims. It was conducted to find out the types of humor, which appear in this episode and define whether those humors obeyed or disobeyed the Grice's Maxims as the standard conversational norms. It was a descriptive study and it employed a purposive sampling as the sampling technique. The data were all the humor utterances, which were able to arouse laughter from the audiences that had significant relationship with the problem statement. Concerning with the maxims, it is found that the humors, which are used in every utterances, tend to disobey at least one of the maxims. The analysis of the maxims was conducted through the context of situation available in each data. The researcher also found that there are three non-observances of the maxims, which are done by the characters in delivering the humor. They are flouting, violating, and infringing the maxims.

Another study by Fajarini (2001), with her research entitled *"An Anlysis of Humor Expression of the Situation Comedy Friends Episode of The One With The Chicken Pox"*. Fajarini (2001) made an attempt to describe the humor expression based on the deviation of principles of an ideal communication.

Kusproborini (2001) in her study entitled *"Analysis of Humor Types and Grice's Maxim Found in "Laughter, The best medicine" in Reader's Digest"*. Kusproborini (2001) tried to describe the types of humor in the column of *Laughter The Best Medicine* and combine it with the theory of maxims by Grice.

Attardo (1993) also deals with the paradox of the communicative nature of jokes, which are defined as a type of text that violates the principle of cooperation. The consequences of violating the cooperative principle (breakdown of communication) are examined. The paper argues against the application of the mention theory to the violation of conversational maxims in jokes, in an attempt to explain away the paradox. The article shows that non-cooperative texts such as jokes convey information through their presuppositional basis, rather than their illocutionary value, through meta messages and suppressions of the violation. Finally, it shows how speakers exploit the non-cooperative nature of humor for other communicative purposes.

### Humor and Grice's Maxims

The four conversational maxims were proposed by Grice in his *'Logic and Conversation'* (1975). These four sets of maxims are to guide those who are conversing with others in order that they can achieve the purpose of conversation maximally, efficiently, and rationally. For this purpose, they have to speak honestly, relevantly, clearly, and they give information as is needed. The following are the four sets of conversational maxims quoted from Levinson's book entitled *Pragmatics* (Levinson,1991, p.101):

### 1. The Maxim of Quality:

Be as truthful as is appropriate:

- a. Do not say what you believe to be false
- b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence

These ideas run into three sets of problem; those are connected with the notion 'truth', those connected with the logic of belief, and those involved in the nature of 'adequate evidence'. In a conversation, each participant must say the truth, he will not say what he believes to be false, and will not say something that he has no adequate evidence. For example, John is a doctor, implicates I believe he is and I have adequate evidence that he is a doctor. However, if later it is found out that he has no degree in doctor, it will appear that he disobeyed the maxim of quality.

### 2. The Maxim of Quantity

Say as much as is helpful:

- a. Make your contribution as informative as is required for the current purposes of the exchange
- b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required

The maxim is "say as much as is helpful but no more and no less". In a conversation, the participants must present the message as informative as is required. For example, I went to Balapan train station yesterday, will implicate that you went to no other place than the train station. If it is later discovered that you got on to the train and went somewhere else, it means that you disobeyed the maxim of quantity, as you are not being informative.

### 3. The Maxim of Relation

Make what you say bear on the issue at hand: "Make your contributions relevant"

The maxim of relevance is treated to be the relevancy condition that is interpreted in such away to be directly relevant to the present interaction. It means that the connection between participants can be shown to be one of relevance not only in simple cases of replies. For example:

John: Where's the roast beef? Ann: The dog looks happy.

Ann's answer means something like "In answer to your question, the beef has been eaten by the dog." However, Ann does not say that, instead he says something that seems irrelevant to John's question. Ann's answer can be made relevant to John's question, supposing Ann does not know the exact answer, by implicating that the dog may eat the beef since it looks happy and full ([www.quicktopic.com](http://www.quicktopic.com)).

### 4. The Maxim of Manner

"Be perspicuous, and specifically: a. Avoid obscurity of expression b. Avoid ambiguity

- c. Be brief d. Be orderly

Thus, Gazdar (1979) rephrases these instructions to be: part (i) instructs speakers and addressers to use, and interpret each other as using the same language or to use the intersection of their perspective languages or idiolects; part (ii) instructs not to use ambiguous expressions; part (iii) concerns with quantifying over the length of expression at some level of representation; and part (iv) is the formulation requires tightening up, generalizing to cover more than two expressions and generalizing to cover spatial precedence as well as temporal precedence.

The maxims of co-operative principle that are stated by Grice above are not a scientific law but a norm to maintain the conversational goal. The conversation goal will be less function when one of those sub-maxims is not fulfilled maximally. Levinson says that these maxims specify what participants have to do in order to converse in a maximally efficient, rational, co-operative way: they should speak sincerely, relevantly, and clearly, while providing sufficient information.

As stated by Bell (2005), instructors should be familiar with the basic findings of sociolinguistic humor research, for example the ways in which humor is contextualized, the variety of functions it can serve, and the situations in which joking is appropriate and with whom. Therefore, PHCT was developed and this paper endeavors to attend the psychometric properties of the test through the following research questions:

1. Is the PHCT which is developed based on the violation of Grice's maxims a reliable instrument to evaluate Iranian Persian Speakers' comprehension of humor?

2. Is the PHCT which is developed based on the violation of Grice's maxims, a valid instrument to evaluate Iranian Persian Speakers' comprehension of humor

### Method

According to Freud (1960), a famous philosopher and psychologist who pioneered the study on humor, jokes can be classified into two main types: tendentious and non-tendentious ones. The former has a character of hostility concerning derogatory, ridicule and aggression whereas the latter, which is void of hostility, is more playful, not aggressive or "innocent" in his term. Freud (1960) also proposed the idea of latent dream thought or the unconscious state comparing to jokes which contains fantasy like a dream with a hidden meaning.

A Persian Humor Comprehension Test (PHCT) comprising 28 humorous texts was designed to measure EFL learners' Persian humor comprehension which was based on Grice's maxims namely manner, quality, quantity, and relation. The humorous texts were non-tendentious, playful on words and Persian structure without targeting any particular social group of people. Every joke in PHCT was presented together with four choice-questions so as to check the students' comprehension (see the appendix). When the students finished reading each joke, they had to check in the boxes for the appropriate answer below the joke text.

The statistical population of the study was language learners taking general English courses at a language institute in Tabas, Iran. The initial sample consisted of 180 learners (103 females and 77 males) which were selected based on the principles of stratified random sampling. Their age ranged from 18 to 29. They all had at least diploma and they were native speakers of Persian.

### Data Analysis

Having collected the required data, SPSS v20 was used for applying descriptive and inferential statistics. The data collected went through the data screening procedure to ensure they are useable, reliable, and valid. Specific issues were checked in data screening like the missing data and the normality. The normality of the data is a prerequisite for many statistical procedures. There are two methods for assessing normality: (a) numerical approach and (b) graphical approach. There are two well-known tests of normality in numerical approach: Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk. The Shapiro-Wilk test is more appropriate for small sample sizes (below 50 participants). Conversely, Kolmogorov-Smirnov test works quite well for large sample sizes (above 50). To determine whether the data collected was normally distributed, a one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was run, the results of which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1		
One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test		
		Questionnaire
N		180
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.09
	Positive	.09
	Negative	-.09
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.32
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.07

As can be seen in Table 1, the results of one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test showed that the data collected from participants was normally distributed ( $K-S Z = 1.32$  and  $p > 0.05$ ). The results of descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, etc.) are presented in Table 2.



Table 2 Descriptive statistics							
	N	Female N	Male N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Scale	180	103	77	11	26	15.80	4.47
Valid N (listwise)	180						

As Table 2 shows, 180 participated completed the questionnaire. They included 103 female learners (57%) and 77 male ones (43%). The mean score turned out to be 15.50 (the lowest possible score is 0 and the highest possible score is 28), the standard deviation was 4.47, and the scores ranged from 11 to 26.

The questionnaire consists of 28 multiple-choice questions and four factors, i.e. manner (questions 1, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 15), relation (questions 2, 4, 8, 13, 16 and 26), quality (3, 7, 17, 20, 21, 23, 25 and 27), and quantity (questions 6, 14, 18, 19, 22, 24 and 28). This instrument was expert-viewed with two experts in the field, and then went through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) with 180 participants for the purpose of making sure about its validity. The results of Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.78
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	1883.08
	df	378
	Sig.	.00

As Table 3 shows, the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy was .78, considered to be a good value of sampling adequacy, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ( $\chi^2(378) = 1883.08, p < .05$ ). According to Hutcheson and Sofroniou (1999), Kaiser recommends "a bare minimum of 0.5 and that values between 0.5 and 0.7 are mediocre, values between 0.7 and 0.8 are good, values between 0.8 and 0.9 are great and values above 0.9 are superb" (Hutcheson and Sofroniou, 1999; as cited in Field, 2009, p. 659). Also, the communalities were all above .4 (see Table 2) confirming that each question shared some common variance with other questions. Thus, these indicators suggested a reasonable factorability. Then, a principal component analysis (PCA) was conducted on all 28 questions using varimax rotations. The factor loading matrix, communalities and total variance are indicated in Table 4.

Table 4 Factor loadings, communalities and total variance					
	Component				Communalities
	Manner	Relation	Quality	Quantity	Extraction
Item 1	.44				.44
Item 5	.63				.55
Item 9	.71				.55
Item 10	.59				.40
Item 11	.57				.45
Item 12	.62				.50
Item 15	.42				.43
Item 2		.40			.41
Item 4		.40			.44
Item 8		.78			.63

Item 13		.52			.44
Item 16		.51			.46
Item 26		.69			.53
Item 3			.69		.54
Item 7			.69		.57
Item 17			.54		.42
Item 20			.74		.57
Item 21			.75		.57
Item 23			.73		.67
Item 25			.70		.51
Item 27			.49		.52
Item 6				.82	.70
Item 14				.42	.47
Item 18				.66	.55
Item 19				.74	.60
Item 22				.62	.41
Item 24				.67	.51
Item 28				.51	.44
Eigenvalues	4.93	3.60	3.08	2.17	
% Variance	17.61	12.87	11.06	7.77	
<i>Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.</i>					
<i>Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.</i>					

As can be seen in Table 4, all items had the loadings above .4, and the eigenvalues showed that the first factor (Manner) explained 18% of the total variance, the second factor (Relation) 13% of the total variance, the third factor (Quality) 12% of the total variance, and the fourth factor (Quantity) 8% of the total variance, showing that all factors combined can explain 57% of the total variance. In addition, the reliability of the questionnaire was attended running Cronbach's Alpha consistency estimation whose results (Table 5) showed that the intended instrument with its 29 items was highly reliable ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

<b>Table 5</b>		
<b>Cronbach's Alpha reliability</b>		
Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	N of Items
.89	.89	28

## Conclusion

The precise and stringent assessment of all language skills and sub-skills is the ultimate goal of the empirical research and humor comprehension is no exception. Therefore, it is of utmost significance that we measure and investigate satisfactoriness and acceptability of our assessment instrument and be aware of possible confounds.

In the current study the researchers employed a pragmatic approach to analyze the kinds of humor used in Persian. From pragmatics perspective, humor can be seen as the deviation of the Cooperative Principle, Politeness Principle in communication, the use of Irony Principle, hyperbole, and litotes, and also the contradiction between acts of speech acts. However, the current study only viewed humors as the deviation of the Cooperative Principle and its maxims and developed a 28 item for humor comprehension based on the Grice's four maxims.

What emerged strongly from data analysis and consequent results, showed that the Cronbach Alpha characteristics of the PHCT was quite satisfactory ( $\alpha=.89$ ) i.e. it can be statistically claimed that



PHCT can yield more or less identical scores in different occasions. Therefore, in response to the first question it can be suggested that PHCT which is developed based on the violation of Grice's maxims can be regarded as a reliable instrument to evaluate Iranian Persian Speakers' comprehension of humor.

For the validity accountability of the PHCT, Principle Component Analysis was run. The central idea of PCA is to identify a small number of common or principal components which effectively summarize a large part of the variation of the data, and serve to reduce the dimensionality of the problem and achieve parsimony (Ait-Sahalia & Xiu, 2019). In other words, in order to provide information about any latent common structure that might exist in a dataset, PCA is an appropriate metric. In the current study, having met the required assumption of PCA as an estimation for confirmatory factor analysis, i.e. multivariate normality, a sufficient sample size, and the correct a priori model specification, it was revealed that the Grice's maxims as the four factors of the PHCT can adequately account for the majority of the variances in students' scores. Therefore, in response to the second question, it can be stated that PHCT which is developed based on the violation of Grice's maxims, is a valid instrument to evaluate Iranian Persian Speakers' comprehension of humor.

With regard to the third research question which seeks to indicate which of the Grice's conversational maxims is violated in each of the items which has led to the emergence of humor discourse, the items which have been clustered into one factor should be investigated in order to see whether they violate the same maxim or not and whether this violation creates humor. If we take items 2, 4, 13, 16, and 26 as an instance which are thronged as one factor, we can notice that they are all related to the maxim of relation and the violation of this maxim has created a humor. Let's take item 2 as an example; when the child says to his mother "می خواهم کف بین بشوم" which literally means 'I would like to be a fortune-teller', his mother replies "اوقتی ماشین لباسشویی ساخت وطن را روشن کردم، بیا کف بین" which is equivalent to the sentence that "when I turn on the washing machine which is made by home country, then you can see the foam". To explicate the humor situation which is created by the violation of the relation maxim, it should be noted that کف in Persian language is equivalent to *fortune teller* and has nothing to do with the mother's answer which says 'come and see *foam* in the washing machine'. In Persian, کف is used as a polysemy word which literally means *fortune teller* and *foam*. And these two meanings are not related to each other at all leading to a humorous situation. Other items within the same factor, all serve the same function.

Since there has been no research in the realm of developing a comprehension test which attempts to measure humor understanding of Persian speakers, comparing and contrasting the findings is out of question. However, it is recommended that the same test be administered to non-native speakers of Persian in order to estimate its psychometric properties since the items have been extracted from a variety of sources (See Persian References). In addition, generalizing the findings from the present study to other contexts should be done with caution given possible differences in terms of L1 background, socio-cultural norms, and educational backgrounds. Some research in other contexts and with various participants is required to collect empirical evidence to consolidate the results of the research.

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