

A Comparative Study of Verbal Humor in Translations of Classic Chinese and American Sitcom Clips

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Abstract: As an indispensable cultural form of modern entertainment life, comedy has become a window to understand countries. In order to better appreciate the excellent cultural works of various countries, this article compares the two classic sitcoms in China and the United States from the perspective of high and low contexts, hoping to analyze their words through comparison. Humor, to explore the reasons for the differences in verbal humor in high and low contexts, and then predict the trend of verbal humor expression under the influence of high and low contexts in China and the United States. The research clips in this article come from the American sitcom Friends and the Chinese sitcom Home with Kids. This paper is mainly divided into five parts. The first part is the literature review, which mainly summarizes the research on verbal humor at home and abroad; the second part is the methodology, that is, the main theories used to study the text, including high-context and low-context theories. The third part is mainly to discover and compare the phenomena and differences of verbal humor between the two Chinese and American sitcom works. The fourth part focuses on exploring the reasons for these differences under high and low contexts. The fifth part is the conclusion of the paper.

Keywords: High and Low Context; Verbal Humor; Friends; Home with Kids

1. Literature Review

Verbal humor plays an important role in our daily life and its importance cannot be ignored. The study of verbal humor at home and abroad has a long history.

1.1 Foreign Research on Verbal Humor

Judging from ancient literature, humor is almost everywhere. Scholars' study of humor dates back to ancient Greece. However, scholars have been studying humor from a linguistic point of view for a short period of time. As far as linguistics is concerned, linguistic humor has been extensively analyzed by sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and other theories. Linguists use the methods of form, function and cognition to study verbal humor from different perspectives such as rhetoric, semantics and pragmatics.

Sociolinguistics uses conversational analysis to study humor and sociological methods to analyze everyday conversations. Harvey Sacks (Sacks, 1972) from Sociolinguistics, was the first to observe puns in everyday conversations and scrutinize the process of telling jokes in conversations. Attardo (Attardo, 1994) treats humor as a combination of phonemes and morphemes, and he analyzes humor primarily from a rhetorical point of view.

From a semantic point of view, Raskin (1985) proposed a script theory of humor, and for his part, humor must be produced if there are two opposing scripts in the polished context. Then, Attardo and Raskin (Attardo & Raskin) 1991) proposed a humor mechanism consisting of six knowledge resources, in which scripts opposed or uncoordinated as their basic knowledge resources.

From a classroom teaching perspective, there are many types of studies of verbal humor taught by teachers and classes, and as to how much verbal humor plays a role in teaching activities, Peiru Tong and Linda Tsung (Tong & Tsung, 2020) conducted empirical research and found that students were motivated and encouraged to actively participate in humorous discourse. In addition, humorous teaching styles help create a friendly, approachable and inclusive classroom culture.

1.2 Domestic Research on Verbal Humor

In China, the famous essayist Lin Yutang (Lin Yutang, 1924) was the first to translate the word "humor" into Chinese "humor". Zhang Gong (Zhang, 1963), he was the first to study humor in a specific way.

It wasn't until the 1980s that much progress was made in the study of humor. Hu Fanzhu (Hu, 1987) considered psycholinguistics, and according to the structure of psycholinguistics, he divided linguistic humor into three types: ways different from expectations, conflicts between experience and reality, and emotional release.

Shi Jing (Shi, 2000) studied humor from the perspectives of phonetics, morphology, and syntax. Li (2002) argues that there is an intrinsic link between pragmatism and English humor, and then uses the principle of cooperation and conversational implications to explore the connections between them. Jinling Wang (Wang, 2002) used the Russian corpus as a research text and concluded that the understanding of oral humor depends on logic, rhetoric, language skills, and context. Wang Wenbin and Wang & Lin (2003) attempt to explain the psychological mechanisms of verbal humor from conceptual integration theory and correlation theory.

In recent years, the study of linguistic humor has been mainly carried out from the perspective of pragmatics, such as violations of dialogue principles, premises, adaptation theory, memetics and other related theories. In addition, research materials are being updated to include sitcoms, TV series, novels, and films.

2. Methodology

According to Hall's high and low background (Hall, 1976), the concept is intended to showcase the cultural diversity of the world. The basis of Hall's division of culture into high and low contexts is that language and culture make people selective, and people can sift through communicative language information, so in true cultural exchange, some information is transmitted by both sides of the exchange, mainly from the communicative language itself. Meanwhile other deep meanings mainly come from the occasion of communication, what is called, context.

Hall's classification of cultural context (Hall, 1976), known as HC and LC, is based on different ways of information sources. High contextual culture refers to the situation in which the creation of communicative information does not depend mainly on communicative language in the process of communication, but on the communicative context. For example, Chinese culture, Japanese culture, African culture, and Latin culture are all high-context cultures. Low context culture means that the creation of communicative information depends mainly on the communicative language itself, that is, the creation of communicative information does not depend on the communicative context, but mainly depends on the language used in communication. American culture, Canadian culture, and most European cultures are low-context cultures.

2.1 High Context

In a high-context culture, communicative information is arranged in advance by both sides of the communicator. The conditions on which the arrangements are based and the information arranged are mostly controlled by both parties to the communication, and a small part of the communication information is contained in the information transmitted in language. In other words, in a high-context culture, the primary intent depends little on the encoded information of the communicative language itself, but primarily on the material context of the communication or the respective backgrounds of both parties to the communication. In the use of language, the role of communication language in high context culture is limited.

2.2 Low context

In low-context cultures, most of the information is passed between speakers into utterances to compensate for the lack of basic information. This puts more emphasis on oral expression. Language expression occupies a great place in communication. They are less dependent on the communication environment and cultural conditions, and they prefer direct communication. On the contrary, members of high-context culture are more willing to take the high-context culture into consideration and speak indirectly. For them, harmony is important.

3. Contrast of Verbal Humor Expressions between Home with Kids and Friends under HC and LC

The ten episodes of the first season are selected as the analysis material, and some typical examples are given below for detailed analysis. Through comparison and contrast, the differences in language humor can be seen at a glance through specific examples.

The data collection was done in three steps. First, watch the first ten episodes of Home with Kids and Friends. The anthology comes from the web, documenting direct and indirect expressions in both works. Select some representative expressions as analysis materials. The following is an analysis of different verbal humor expression characteristics under the influence of high and low contexts through specific examples.

3.1 Direct and Indirect Expressions

High- and low-context cultural exchanges exist in all cultures; however, only one form is explicit in a high- or low-level context. Individualistic members tend to communicate directly in a low context; in contrast, collectivist members tend to communicate indirectly in a high context because maintaining harmony and coherence within the group is important (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988).

(1) Monica: Oh, my gosh! Rachel, honey, are you okay? Where's Paolo?

Rachel: Rome. Jerk missed his flight. Monica: And then your face exploded?

Rachel: No. Okay. I was at the airport getting into a cab when this woman- this blonde planet with a pocketbook, starts yelling at me. Something about how it was her cab first. And then the next thing I know she just starts pulling me out by my hair! So I'm blowing my attack whistle thingy and three more cabs show up. And as I'm going to get into a cab she tackles me. And I hit my head on the curb and cut my lip on my whistle. Everybody having fun at the party?

(Season 1, episode 10)

In this example, Monica is throwing a party in their room and Rachel is planning to meet her boyfriend. However, Rachel unexpectedly returned home with a bruised face. So Monica asked her for details. In this conversation, we can learn what happened to Rachel from her words. Rachel's words are typically direct expressions. Rachel's verbal expression was unambiguous. This dialogue is language-dependent. Even without knowing the context of this conversation, one can clearly understand what happened to Rachel.

(2)夏东海: 我看看你是有点紧张了吧

刘梅: 去你的 我紧张什么呀我, 我就是有点心跳过速

(Season 1, episode 1)

The background of this episode is that Xia Xue, as the elder sister of the family, has lived at her grandfather's house since she was 7 years old. Liu Mei and Xia Donghai want to welcome Xia Xue to the rebuilt family. This was the first time Liu Mei saw Xia Xue. Xia Donghai went to his father's house to pick up Xia Xue, while Liu Mei stayed at home to prepare a sumptuous dinner for the reunion. In addition, Liu Mei also decorated Xia Xue's room. As the stepmother of Xia Yu and Xia Xue, Liu Mei is very difficult to get along with these two children, because they have never met or know each other. In this conversation, Xia Donghai said that Liu Mei was very nervous about seeing Xia Xue, but Liu Mei immediately denied it and said that she was not nervous at all, just a little moved. We all know that when someone is nervous, he or she may experience tachycardia. Therefore, Liu Mei's response violated the principle of quantity, she should have said "yes, I am nervous", and her statement exceeded the requirements. So, the implied meaning came out. Liu Mei was nervous about seeing Xia Xue, so she said it indirectly. The role of Liu Mei's humor is to ease her anxiety when she first saw Xia Xue.

(3)夏雨: 妈,姐姐教我包的饺子。

夏雪: 我可没教你包手雷啊。

(Season1, episode8)

In this scene, the whole family is making dumplings. Xiao Yu showed his mother the dumplings taught by his sister Xia Xue, and Xia Xue responded that she did not teach him how to pack grenades. The implication is that Xia Yu didn't make dumplings like a grenade, he didn't make dumplings properly. On the other hand, Xia Xue did not say that the way she made dumplings was wrong, which would reduce Xia Yu's confidence in making dumplings.

3.2 Individualism and Collectivism

(4) Monica: Look, I-I could go on pretending..

Joey: Okay!

Monica: -But that wouldn't be fair to me, it wouldn't be fair to Alan- it won't be fair to you!

Ross: Who wants fair? You know I just want things back. You'd know, the way they were.

(Seasonal, episode3)

This is a classic example of how low-context culture communicators deal with interpersonal conflict, with two people saying whatever comes to their mind, communicating straight-forward and full of hurtful words. In contrast, in the eyes of the Chinese, this type of communication is impolite, unsympathetic, and disregarding the inner feelings of others, and is unacceptable. During this conversation, Monica decided to break up with Allen because Monica's friend and Allen got along very well, and they were both attracted by Allen's strengths and didn't want Monica to leave Allen. When Monica said she could keep pretending to be fine with Ellen, all her friends said yes. When Monica says it's unfair to all of them, they say they don't want fairness, they just want something in return. So, in this conversation, the value of American individualism is brought to light. In the United States, individual values take precedence over collective values. In this example, all of Monica's friends only care about their own feelings.

(5) 刘星：妈，我饿了。

夏雨：我也饿了。

刘梅：妈妈准备了一桌丰盛的晚餐，但是得等姐姐来了以后才能吃，现在不能吃，你们俩谁饿的受不了了，谁去给我喝杯水去。

刘星：饿了给喝水，这是后妈。

(Seasonal, episode 1)

In this conversation, the family is waiting for Xia Xue to join the extended family living at their grandfather's house. In order to welcome his daughter whom he had never met, Liu Mei cooked a sumptuous and delicious dinner; Xia Donghai picked her up. Liu Xing and Xia Yu are waiting for their sister. While waiting, they got hungry and then asked their mother for permission to eat the sumptuous meal. However, in Chinese values, dinner is not served until everyone is there.

4. Discussion About the Reasons of Different Verbal Humor Expressions under the HC and LC

Under the theory of high and low context, we can use specific examples from the two classic sitcoms Home with Kids and Friends to analyse the reasons why different kinds of verbal humor expressions are generated.

4.1 Reasons of Direct and Indirect Expressions with Example 1-3

In high context, people focus on implied meaning, they consider what is implied to be more important than what is said, and they can recognize the difference between actual words and true intentions. On the other hand, low-context cultures tend to have clear messages that are not clearly understood by all involved. There are many such claims in China. Furthermore, Ting-Toomey (Ting-Toomey, 2007) argues that people in low-context cultures are more likely to accept opposition and direct conflict, while people in high-context cultures are more likely to accept non-opposition and indirect conflict.

Verbal information expressed in direct communication reflects the true intention of the speaker, while verbal information expressed in indirect communication disguises and conceals the true intention of the speaker (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988). Thus, indirect communication emphasizes the listener's ability to understand and infer the speaker's intentions, while direct communication emphasizes the speaker's ability to articulate his intentions (Okabe, 1987). Consequently, high-context cultures tend to be audience-centric. High-context cultures rely more on non-verbal communication, where people are good at expressing different meanings through subtle differences in facial expressions, behavior, and even the place of interaction. Persuasion and influence often depend on non-linguistic factors such as social status, power, and seniority (Gudykunst, 1998).

4.2 Reasons of Individualism and Collectivism with Example 4 and 5

As we can see in Example 4, low-context cultures are characterized by individualism. When they disagree with others, communicators tend to approach problems in a positive conflicting manner. This kind of communication is direct and pertinent, and it is easy to cause controversy. They are verbally more aggressive than people from high-context cultures.

And through example 5, we all know that in China, under the direct influence of collectivism, we live in a community that tends to safeguard collective interests. In most cases, the Chinese prefer to observe the thoughts around them in order to match the community before making decisions and choices. That is, consider the feelings of others before making a decision or expressing your own thoughts. As the saying goes, worry before you worry; enjoy only after people can enjoy it. This is the strategic embodiment of Chinese collectivism. Although the United States emphasizes individualism, they believe that individual values are superior to collective values.

Conclusion

Friends and Home with Kids is a popular American and Chinese sitcom. This paper uses high and low context to interpret the implied meaning of both sides. Furthermore, from the analysis, we can learn how to apply theory to explain specific material.

Through comparison, we have a clear understanding of the similarities and differences between Chinese and American sitcoms. The following sections present the key findings:

On the one hand, the verbal humor in "Family With Children" has the same verbal humor function, which is their first similarity. On the other hand, we can see from the discussion and analysis that in high and low context cultures, Americans prefer to choose a direct way to express their thoughts, and do not care much about the feelings of others. Under the influence of China's long-standing Confucianism, the Chinese tend to take an indirect approach to expressing their ideas and are very concerned about others. More importantly, the difference between Americans and Chinese is that collective interests take precedence over personal interests, and when necessary, personal interests should be sacrificed to protect the collective interests of the Chinese mind.

Last but not least, since sitcoms are a particular form of communication, there are many ways of expressing words in order to achieve humorous effect. In daily life, the communication between the speaker and the listener may be simpler and clearer than that of a sitcom, and the main purpose of communication is to adapt to the needs of passing information or doing things and maintaining social relations.

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