

## The Analysis of Verbal Humor in “Friends” based on Face Theory

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**Keyword:** “Friends”; Face Theory; Verbal Humor

**Abstract:** In “Friend”, the humorous dialogues and witty humorous words catch the audience’s eye. Applied to the face-to-face and negative sides of face theory, people can interpret the processing mechanism of verbal humor, which help reader have a better understanding of verbal humor. Verbal humor is the lubricant of language communication, making conversations seem interesting and become dynamic. The humorous dialogue in the play offers a lot of materials for pragmatic research and analysis of verbal humor.

### 1. Verbal Humor

Humor is an appendage of human language. The topics of “what is humor”, “why human use humor”, “how human use humor” and “when human use humor” is a focus of scholars debating. In fact, on a broad level, based on verbal self, humor makes a difference between human self-cognition and empirical knowledge to cause humor. On a narrow level, humor is a chaffing and playful way for humans to achieve a humorous pragmatic effect. With the development of pragmatics, scholars continue to use the principles of cooperation, politeness, presupposition, and relevance theory to interpret humorous discourse. However, the oriental cultural characteristics determine that China is more biased towards the “face theory”, which conforms to its cultural characteristics. From the perspective of the “face theory”, this paper, based on the classic comedy of Friends, analyzes how verbal humor is generated as well as processed and how to protect face, so as to better apply the face theory under face humor into the context to reflect the difference between oriental culture and the western culture on “face”.

“What is face” is the focus of many scholars. Lu Xun (1991) and Lin Yutang (1936) claimed that face can be interpreted from two aspects: face is Abstract and unpredictable from the psychological level; face is also the visual impression that the self presents to the other. The former is more aligned with the “core of face theory” - the core value system of self. The face is the lubricant of Chinese social interaction, but it is difficult to understand. Regarding the definition of “face”, (Hu Xianyu, Yan Xuewei, He Youhui think that to a great extent, face is derived from the prestige brought by sociality and the respect and self from the other. Liu Jifu, Wang Yunan) believes that from the perspective of psychology and sociology, face is closely related to self-esteem and culture. The essence of face refers to the value and status of individuals in “others’ orientation”. Self-worth is the core of the face, social resources are a symbol of face. Goffman (1967), the first foreign scholar to propose the “face theory”, thinks that face, under a specific social interaction environment, requires the individual's social value orientation to conform to the overall social value orientation, so as to gain recognition from the society. He also divides his face into two parts, one of which is a positive face and the other is a negative face, including the threatful face, also called face threatened acts, referred to as FTA. The positive face is mainly to maintain the face of the speaker and the listener in the verbal communication, and the negative face is mainly to damage the face of the speaker and the listener in the verbal communication. What’s more, the politeness theory proposed by Brown&Levinson indicates that face is the public self-image that everyone asks for others to recognize, and is also something that requires emotional input, can be lost, maintained or increased. Meanwhile face needs to be kept in mind during the interaction.(Brown&Levinson 1978)In verbal communication, face theory to some extent can maintain the face of the listener, and can also damage the face of the listener. Humorous discourse is conducive to positive and negative faces in face theory to add color to human language communication.

Face theory in verbal humor mainly uses positive face to maintain the face of both sides, so that both sides can protect each other's face in a humorous conversation to achieve harmony in interpersonal relationships. In speech conversations, sometimes in order to maintain the listener's positive face, the speaker can adopt some strategies of satisfying the information expectation and certain desires of the listener, and can also use some ways such as the praise, sympathy, and compassion understanding that the listener has followed. However, there is also a face threat problem between the speaker and the listener. The listener's rejection to the speaker is invisibly reducing the negative face of the speaker. In order to reduce the conflict with their faces, both the speaker and the listener can take apologize, compensation and other mechanisms to give the other party a certain repayment. In actual language situations, both sides of the conversation will reduce the language and behavior that harms each other's face, but in order to achieve a humorous language effect, people have to deliberately damage the face of both sides in violation of the principle of cooperation and politeness. "Friends" is a classic blueprint for American comedy. In the play, the humorous dialogue has achieved a good humor effect. Therefore, this paper selects some classic humorous dialogues of "Friends" to analyze the humor mechanism from the perspective of face theory.

## **2. Pragmatic Strategies of Verbal Humorousness in Friends from the Perspective of Face Theory**

Under normal circumstances, people prefer to adopt social humor to communicate socially. They adopt the positive face of both sides and minimize the negative face of both sides. Comedy works use positive face and negative face, adding imitation, to create humor. The comedy work of "Friends" mainly describes the family life, friendship, love, career and other aspects of the seven protagonists, and truly reproduces the living conditions of the people of different social status. In the play, people often use the face threatening theory to directly or indirectly maintain or damage the face of others. The play combines the specific context to make the audience feel the effect of verbal humor.

### **2.1 Humor of damaging the speaker's positive face**

In the ninth episode in the sixth season of Friends, the classic dialogue between Ross and Monica reflects the verbal humor produced by the negative face of the speaker.

Example 1:

Monica: Mom and Dad, Ross got smoked in college.

Ross: You are such a tattletale!

Ross: Mom and dad, you remember that the time you walked in my room and smelled marijuana?

Geller: Yes!

Ross: I told you that it was Chandler, who was smoking the pot, it was me, I am sorry.

Geller: It was you?

Monica: Chandler did not melt your record, Ross did. You know that mailman that you have got fired, he did not steal your play boy. Ross did.

Ross's role in the play is an archaeology professor with a steady income and decent job. Monica's role in the play is a chef, with relatively little work income and a moderate quality of life. In this episode, in order to maintain Chandler's positive face and re-establish his high image in the parents' minds, Monica directly damages Ross's positive face, so that the two break their respective scandals and violate the principle of excessive information in the principle of cooperation, which brings lots of verbal humorousness. From Ross's personal point of view, Monica directly damages his face, which causes him to feel a sense of guilt in front of his parents, himself-improvement in the heart of his parents, and his image of hard-working to collapse instantly. From Monica's point of view, Ross also directly damages her positive face. Monica and Chandler live together, but her parents don't know it, which makes it difficult for her parents to accept. It is to damage the positive face of the speaker and disclose each other's scandals, which brings the audience a different verbal humor

effect.

## **2.2 Humor of damaging the speaker's negative face**

In the ninth episode in the third season of Friends, the dialogue between Ross, Monica, Chandler, and Joey in the rugby game damages the negative face of the speaker to produce the verbal humor.

Example 2:

Ross: Monica and I are not supposed to play football.

Joey: Say who? Your Mom?

Ross, Monica: Yes!

Rachel: what do you mean? She asked her boyfriend and scared to hear this answer.

Monica: every Thanks giving, we used to have a touch football game named The Geller Bowl.

Chandler: No, No, No, you should say that proudly.

Ross and Monica hold rugby matches every year at home. However, because of the bad competition between brothers and sisters, the game is terminated. After more than a decade, the two have not had the confidence to be involved in the rugby match. Until the other people want to play a game, the two have been still worried about the game to because of the previous things, so that they dare not accept the game. Therefore, the others begin to tease about why they could not participate in the game. Through teasing their childish behavior in a playful and joke-like way, Joey indirectly damages Ross and Monica's negative face, which triggers a series of jokes. Then Chandler replied, "how we gonna get there, my mom won't let me cross the road". The word is very joke-like, which shows the negative face of the two people to express the humorous effect of the language to the fullest. In the actual conversation, the appropriate use of humorous strategies and appropriate praise for others can give others more sympathy and understanding, which reduces the impact of damaging others' negative face. Humor is the lubricant of language, which makes it a pleasant conversation with others in an euphemistic way.

## **2.3 Humor of damaging the listener's positive face**

In the ninth episode in the third season of Friends, Ross, Chandler, Joey, Rachel, Pheobe has an eating conversations involved damaging the positive face of the listener and creating verbal humor.

Example 3:

Ross: the pay we should divide it. Everyone should give me 28\$.

Joey, Rachel: No!

Pheobe: No, No way, it is not gonna happen. We are happy for your promotion. But cold cucumber mush for 30 something bucks? Rachel just had that little salad and Joey with little teeny Pizza!

Their salaries are different and their financial abilities are limited. Compared to Ross, Chandler, Monica's work is more decent. In addition, the other three protagonists are still busy in surviving. Originally they plans to celebrate Monica's promotion and prepare for Ross's birthday party, but have to care the expense of food. They damage the positive face of the listener in the conversation. Ross's answer undoubtedly made Joey, Rachel, Pheobe embarrassed, and Pheobe's answer also did, which indirectly damages the positive face of the listener. Work, money, and status should not be the measure of friendship between each other. The positive face of the speaker and the listener is damaged, which makes the conversation embarrassing humorous. Verbal humor is a comprehensive expression of what each other thinks and does.

## **2.4 Humor of damaging the listener's negative face**

In the sixth episode of the sixth season of Friends, the dialogue caused by the trivialities between Chandler and Joey creates a good humorous pragmatic effect.

Example 4:

Chandler: Listen, guys, I am moving out. You will be in charge of paying the rent.

Joey: Right. When is it in due?

Chandler: First of month.

Joey: That is every month.

Chandler: Just the month you wanna live here. Why don't I cover you for a while?

Joey: No No way! Joey Tribbiani does not take any charity.

Chandler's decision to live with Monica means that he can't give Joey more care and attention to a large extent. He puts forward his ideas that he takes the initiative to bear a part of Joey's living expenses, but his suggestion was directly opposed by Joey, which damages Joey's negative face. From Joey's point of view, his personal income is unstable. If he accepts Chandler's charity again and again, where is his self-worth? Then Chandler adopted a more euphemistic way to make Joey accept his help to reduce the damage of Joey's negative face, so as to maintain the harmonious relationship between the two. Damaging the negative face of the listener to attach the verbal humor makes the communication between the two sides more smooth. The use of humor can not only achieve the speaker's intention, but also satisfy the listener's discourse expectation. In western culture, the more direct way to obtain face is to satisfy its positive and negative faces. Positive face means that both sides agree something consensual, while negative face emphasizes the communicators' freedom to choose.(Guo Ping, 2002) At the same time, "positive face" and "negative face" form two levels of contradiction but simultaneous occurrence.

### 3. Summary

On the basis of the expectation of the speaker and the speaker's dialogue, the speaker and the listener directly or indirectly damage the positive or negative face of the other party to produce the verbal humor. The processing mechanism of humor, the generation of humor and the understanding of humor are constantly developed based on the politeness principle, cooperation principle and relevance theories of linguistics, combined with specific cultural environment, specific text analysis, and better understanding of verbal humor from the perspective of the face theory. After damaging the positive or negative face of the other side, someone should adopt a humorous compensation strategy to reduce the damage of the face to make the communication pleasant. The verbal humor from the perspective of the face theory provides a pragmatic strategy for people's communication in different cultures to promote good communication. This paper focuses on revealing the processing mechanism of verbal humor and analyzing how to use facial theory to interpret verbal humor.

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