

A Study of Humorous Language from the Cognitive Perspective

Yanmei Jia¹, Xianglan Chen²

¹Canvard College, Beijing Technology and Business University, Beijing, China

²Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China

Keywords: Cognition, Perspective, Humor, Language research

Abstract: Humor is a common phenomenon in our daily communication, but most people know little about it. The author tries to make people have a more comprehensive understanding of English humor from the perspective of pragmatics through the analysis of this article, so that people can better appreciate and use humor correctly, and at the same time, to better promote language teaching. This article attempts to analyze and explore the characteristics of humorous discourse and the reasons for humor from a cognitive perspective.

1. Introduction

Humorous discourse is everywhere, and its positive effects are self-evident. There is no shortage of humorous words in daily life and work. Many domestic scholars have conducted research on humorous discourse, mainly from the perspectives of research summary, pragmatics and sociolinguistics. A .T. Li conducted a review and reflection on domestic language humor research in 2018 [1], it analyzed the humorous discourse of the movie “The King's Speech” from the perspective of pragmatics [1]. A.P. Mo and X.B. Pan (2017) analyzed the generation of verbal humor in “Friends” through relevance theory and cooperative principles [2]. A .T. Li in 2018, he conducted a multimodal discourse analysis of the humorous language in “Private Customization” from the perspective of sociolinguistics [1]. In recent years, some scholars have studied teacher humorous discourse. (A .T. Li A.P. Mo and X.B. Pan) In 2017, he conducted research on teachers' humorous discourse and the development of students' social pragmatic ability [2]. Y.T. Hong (2019) analyzed the humorous discourse strategies of Chinese classroom teachers [3]. This article analyzes humorous discourse from a cognitive perspective and explores its inspiration to language teaching.

2. Humorous Language

Humorous discourse is widely used in various fields. The English word humour is derived from the Latin humour, which originally means the fluid that can determine the mental and physical conditions of a person and act as a lubricant. “Humor” is the transliteration of English humour [1]. People now think that humor refers to a state or quality [1]. A person with humorous qualities is easily loved by others.

The research on humor has a long history. Among the many early Western theories, people roughly divided the language of humor into three types [3]: (1) the theory of superiority from the perspective of social behavior, which can be traced back to Plato's time. Representatives are Plato and Aris. Dodd and Hobbs. The so-called superiority means that humor originates from people's sense of superiority to others, and is a mockery of others' defects and mistakes. (2) From the perspective of psychoanalysis, Freud advocated this view, that is, humor is used to relieve tension or cope with difficult or embarrassing situations in communication. (3) Kant and Schopenhauer are the main characters from the perspective of psychological cognition. They believe that humor is produced on the basis of absurd, unexpected, and inconsistent context. These three are regarded as classic traditional humor theories. Although these three theories have their incompleteness, the basic mechanism of humor they put forward provides a good direction for future humor research. Later, scholars in various disciplines have more or less research on humor. Less influenced by these three classic traditional theories.

3. Principle Analysis of Humorous Discourse

3.1 Violation of Quantitative Guidelines

Quantity criterion refers to giving enough but not too much information. Sometimes the speaker violates this rule, it will produce a humorous effect.

For example:

Mary: How many times do you shave a day?

Mike: Oh, forty or fifty times.

Mary: Are you crazy?

Mike: No, I am a barber.

In this conversation, Mike violated the quantitative guidelines and did not give enough information. In the beginning of life, he should tell Mary that he is a hairdresser, so that it will not cause Mary to misunderstand him, and at the same time he will not think that he is wrong. For a barber, it is normal to cut others so many times a day. The barber deliberately violated the quantitative guidelines, thus achieving a humorous effect [2].

3.2 Violation of Quality Guidelines

Quality guidelines require us to ensure that what we say is true and reliable. In real life, sometimes the violation of quality standards can also lead to humorous effects.

For example:

Teacher: Were you copying his sums?

Pupil: No, sir. Just looking to see if he got mine right.

In this conversation, it is obvious that the student is plagiarizing his classmate's work. However, he lied to avoid the teacher's accusation [4]. Although he violated the quality guidelines, he achieved a humorous effect and eased the atmosphere.

3.3 Violated the Relationship Code

The relationship rule requires that what we say is related to the content of the conversation. Sometimes people deliberately violate the relationship rules in order to achieve humorous effects [1].

Mother: I left two pieces of cakes in the cupboard last night and now there is only one piece left. Can you explain that?

Child: I suppose it was so dark that I didn't notice the other one.

In this conversation, the mother asked the child to explain why there was only one cake left, but the child answered that it was too dark, and did not notice the other cake and did not give a positive answer. The child deliberately violates the relationship rules, which produces a humorous effect.

3.4 Violated the Way Guidelines

The guidelines for ways require people to express clearly. However, in communication, people always misunderstand the true intention of the other party.

"Are your mother and father in?" asked the neighbor when the small boy opened the door.

"They was in," said the boy, "but they is out now."

"They was in and they is out!" exclaimed the neighbor. "Where is your grammar?"

"Out in the kitchen making some cookies."

In this conversation, because grammar and grandma are pronounced similarly. Therefore, the boy thinks that the neighbor is asking where his grandma is. This neighbor violated the rules of manner, and his vague pronunciation led to humor.

3.5 Analysis of the Politeness Principle of Humorous Discourse

Leech imitated Grice's approach and divided the politeness principle into: the principle of decency, the principle of generosity, the principle of praise, the principle of humility, the principle of consensus, and the principle of sympathy [5]. Sometimes, humorous words violate the principle of politeness.

A man comes to after a serious amputation of his leg. The doctor comes to him and says, "I have a

good news and some bad news, which would like first?" The man says, "Give me the bad news first!" The doctor says, "I am terribly sorry. We amputated the wrong leg!"

The man says, "OH MY GOD! What could be good news after that?"

The doctor says, "The guy in the next bed wants to buy your shoes!"

This conversation produced a humorous effect, but the doctor violated the sympathy rule in the polite principle. For this patient, someone wanting to buy his shoes is not a real good thing for him. As a doctor, in the face of injured patients, we must consider the patient's feelings and show sympathy for the patient.

Humorous words can achieve the effect of relaxing the atmosphere, but sometimes improper use can cause harm to others. Therefore, in daily life, we must learn to use humorous words appropriately to better promote communication.

4. The Characteristics of Humorous Language from a Cognitive Perspective

The term "humor" was originally proposed by the French surrealist writer André Breton in the 1920s. In the United States in the 1960s, "humor" has been further developed, even affecting the literary trend for a period of time. For the definition of "humor", Western critics have various opinions [5]. The definition of "humor" in Encyclopedia Britannica is "a kind of desperate humor, trying to elicit people's laughter, as human beings obviously meaningless and absurd response." The most representative work in this literary boom is Joseph Heller's "Catch-22". The novel fictionalizes an American flying brigade during World War II. The troops are stationed on the island of Pianozza near Rome, Italy. At the same time, it revolves around the protagonist Yusolin and the officers and soldiers on the island's ridiculous behavioral language to show us created a bizarre world different from the war world described in previous novels.

4.1 Symbol of Language

On the one hand, humorous novels conceal the essence of tragedy with humorous language and comical ridicule; on the other hand, they completely expose the dark background in front of all kinds of absurdity and ridiculousness. "The language of the characters in "Military Regulations" is often unclear and full of logical errors. Sometimes it can make people confused and unconscious, but sometimes seemingly inexplicable dialogues are sometimes frightening to read. For example, at the beginning of the novel [6]. After discovering that the patient in the same ward had died, Yusolin and Dunbar began accusing each other of the murderer for no reason. After being attacked during the mission, Yusolin commanded the navigator Afee loudly, but not only did the latter lack the slightest will to fight, but he kept repeating to Yusolin, "I can't hear what you are saying." In another battle, player Snowden was seriously injured, but no matter how people around him asked about the injury, he only repeated "I'm so cold." "These three words. Most of the dialogues in the whole article are like this. It can be found that on the one hand, the words that often appear in the dialogues of the characters are extremely negative, such as death, madness, cold, etc [5]. On the other hand, the characters and Dialogues between characters also often occur in self-talking situations, which makes the communication between each other always in a state of failure. The signs in the language all symbolize the tension, strangeness, and fear between people [6]. Relationship is an indirect reflection of the state of social existence of that era, and at the same time it also made a ruthless irony.

4.2 Symbols of Things

The symbol of things can be divided into two categories. The first category is the symbol of specific things, and the second category is the borrowing and adaptation of some historical tasks or events to make them have symbolic meaning. The most representative of the first type of specific things is the snow-white soldiers who appear many times in the novel. "This soldier is wrapped in plaster and bandages from head to toe, and his limbs are no longer usable." "Hanging on it in black and motionless, it looks strange." "They really see it from the snow-white soldier. The clear place is a black hole above the mouth, and this black hole is not intact." A series of descriptions of the soldier's appearance and living conditions are a bit creepy [6].

At the same time, everyone around, including the protagonist, Yusolin, adopts an attitude of spectating. This image is sensational, and the appearance of characters with unclear meaning fully demonstrates the alienation between people. In addition, when Yusolin returned to his tent, he would mention that there was a “dead man” in his tent. Although the “dead” that Yusolin was constantly mentioned in the plot development was explained later, it did not the meaning expressed is no longer entangled in the question of whether there is a dead person in the tent and who the so-called dead person is. It is similar to the symbolic meaning expressed by the snow-white soldier all over the body, and both reveal the absurd world in the symbol. The second type of symbol is some historical characters or some behaviors described in novels.

For example, in the novel, Yusolin was bored with the work of checking letters and randomly signed all the documents with the name of the famous American writer Washington Irving, which symbolized the subversion and satire of tradition. The behavior of some characters in the brigade is also strange, such as the loyalty oath campaign initiated by Captain Black, which in the end almost developed into an absurd scene. Colonel Sheskopf was promoted by rigorous training of the troops, and even wanted to use copper wire to fix the soldiers' wrists to the crotch for the effect of training, but it was not implemented because of the shortage of materials. All kinds of things and behaviors have exposed the absurdity of war. The selfishness of the characters in the army, especially the superior officers through the war, and the ruthless analysis of the behavior and psychology of the soldiers regardless of the safety and security of the soldiers have a strong irony [7].

4.3 The Symbol of the Novel as a Whole

The most concentrated expression is the description of “Catch-22”. “There is only one trap here, this is Catch-22.” The first sentence of the novel has already hinted to us. This Catch Regulation is mentioned many times in the novel, but the specific content of the Catch Regulation is not explained. It seems that all absurdities can be explained by this Catch Regulation 22. For example, if one person in the brigade goes crazy, He can apply to stop flying, but when he applies, it shows that he is still sensible, then he must continue to perform the task, which forms a spiral of sophistry. Or perhaps the 22nd Military Regulation stipulates that soldiers must obey the command of the chief from beginning to end, etc [7]. This makes this military rule without substantive meaning, and becomes a trap that no one can escape.

5. Summary

The role of humorous words cannot be ignored. We can also use humorous words appropriately in teaching to achieve better teaching results. Classroom teaching is relatively conducted in more formal occasions, but language teaching requires a relatively relaxed atmosphere. A relaxed learning atmosphere can relieve students' learning pressure to a certain extent and relax students. Compared with the teaching of other subjects, language teaching requires more communication in the classroom. Only by creating a relaxed learning atmosphere can students dare to express their ideas. How teachers systematically use humor related to the teaching content is the focus of future research. Most teachers regard humor as a tool to improve the classroom environment and ignore its function of promoting learning. They also found that humorous words are an effective way to improve students' social skills. How to better use humorous discourse in language teaching is our future research direction.

References

- [1] A.T. Li, English humorous expression, College English, vol.7, pp.45-47, 2018.
- [2] A.P. Mo and X.B. Pan, Research on humorous discourse of foreign teachers, Foreign Language Research, vol.11, pp.70-75, 2017.
- [3] Y.T. Hong, Analysis of the application of humorous language in TV news cameras, Communication Research, vol.15, pp.33-36, 2019.
- [4] Y.Y. Song, Analysis of humorous language and narrative strategy in popular science movies,

Popular Science Research, vol.6, pp.65-68, 2019.

[5] Y.Ch. Liu, Analysis of humorous language in film and television works, Western Radio and Television, vol.12, pp.112-114, 2019.

[6] M.H. Cui, A preliminary study on the teaching of the basic course of film and television director in the new media environment, The Drama House, vol.22, pp.212-214, 2017.

[7] S. T. Li, Pragmatic analysis of humorous discourse and its inspiration to language teaching, Communication Research, vol.15, pp. 17-21, 2017.