

A Comparative Analysis of Xiangsheng and Stand-up Comedy

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ABSTRACT

The Journal of Studies in Language 38.2, 189-201. Xiangsheng and stand-up comedy are representative comedy genres performed in China and Western countries, respectively. Both performances require only spoken words, and don't demand complicated stage props. This minimalist form of performance has gained popularity from a wide audience. However, the differences in the production of humor between xiangsheng and stand-up comedy have not been studied well yet. Herein, we compare and analyze xiangsheng and stand-up comedy using relevance theory. The results show that both xiangsheng and stand-up comedy strictly follow relevance theory in the process of creating humor. On the other hand, xiangsheng and stand-up comedy use quite different modes to produce humor, while both of them share a common mechanism in humor production.
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Keywords: xiangsheng, stand-up comedy, relevance theory, context, humor

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본인이 투고한 논문은 다른 학술지에 게재된 적이 없으며 타인의 논문을 표절하지 않았음을 서약합니다. 추후 중복게재 혹은 표절된 것으로 밝혀질 시에는 논문제재 취소와 일정 기간 논문 제출의 제한 조치를 받게 됨을 인지하고 있습니다.

1. Introduction

As a verbal phenomenon, humor plays an indispensable role throughout our daily lives (Lytle, 2007; Ma and Jiang, 2013; Norrick and Spitz, 2008). Humor has proven to have mental, physical, and social benefits (Lytle, 2007; Scheel and Gockel, 2017). Humor can reduce stress, relieve anxiety and tension, and solve embarrassing situations we encounter in our day to day interactions.

There are many forms and types of performance of humor. Among them, xiangsheng in China and stand-up comedy in Western countries are the most representative and popular language-based humor performances. The production and reception of humor in comedy have received much attention in linguistic studies. Although the majority of previous studies agree that verbal humor comes from the incongruity between expectations and outcomes, there are few studies focusing on how xiangsheng and stand-up comedy create humor (Goldstein, 2013; Morreall, 1989; Yus, 2017).

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Here, we study the mode and mechanism of xiangsheng and stand-up comedy in the production of humor, and compare them using relevance theory. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first comparative analysis of xiangsheng and stand-up comedy. The xiangsheng “Hu Kou Xia Xiang (虎口遐想)” and “Xin Hu Kou Xia Xiang (新虎口遐想)”, and stand-up comedy from “Tuo Kou Xiu Da Hui (脱口秀大会)” are used as examples for our comparative analysis.

2. Background

2.1 Relevance Theory

In 1986, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson proposed relevance theory, a cognitively-oriented pragmatic theory used to explain how humans understand the world and each other (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). In other words, it is a theory about cognition and communication.

2.1.1 Principles of Relevance

The two principles of relevance are the cognitive principle and communicative principle (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). The cognitive principle states that

“Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance” (Horn and Ward, 2006: 610),

while the communicative principle says

“Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (Horn and Ward, 2006: 612).

Listeners tend to compare the new information from speakers with the knowledge they already have, then focus on the information which is most related to their knowledge, followed by making assumptions about the speakers’ intentions through processing the information with the minimal effort to achieve the goal of cognition. While an expectation of optimal relevance is created, differences in experience and cognitive background between speakers and listeners may cause misunderstanding and humorous effect instead of achieving optimal relevance. Humor arises from the contrast between maximal relevance and optimal relevance.

2.1.2 Ostensive–inferential Communication

According to relevance theory, relevance regulates the process of communication, and communication proceeds with inferences. Since communication is relevance-oriented, communicators pay more attention to the information which is more related to them during the communication process. In ostensive-inferential communication, the speakers tend to generate ostensive stimulus that produces optimal relevance presumptions. Nevertheless, the listeners only interpret and process the information which is related to them. Hence, to proceed with successful communication, the speakers must draw the listeners’ attention. The key to ostensive communication is relevance. Therefore, two demands must be met to

understand an utterance and achieve optimal relevance:

- (1) Having a context for the communication.
- (2) Enabling the listener to understand the context and drawing the listener's attention.

To be more specific, communication is ostensive to the speaker while communication is inferential to the listener. To proceed with successful communication, the listener must choose the right contextual assumption that is intended by the speaker. If the listener fails to understand the context, the utterance can't be interpreted correctly during communication. Thus, according to relevance theory, it is necessary to understand the context to appreciate the humor.

2.2 Context

All communication is conducted between speakers and listeners with a certain background. Smooth communication depends on the background, also regarded as context, which is used in the interpretation of the communication. Basically, context refers to all the aspects that are relevant for understanding of a certain written or spoken language (Finkbeiner et al., 2012). Relevance theory suggests context plays a crucial role in the communication process. According to relevance theory, the context of an utterance is not fixed or unchangeable. The context is dynamic, and is selected by the search for relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). In communication, the listener expects a stimulus from the speaker. The stimulus is relevant, and the listener selects a context in which the expectations can be met (Clark, 2013). Context is considered to be the listener's assumptions about communication. Although the external physical environment plays an important role in choosing contextual assumptions for utterance interpretation, it is not the primary source for contextual assumptions.

Context is chosen, not given, because the context is the listener's assumptions. Since context is a matter of choice, selection of context has a significant effect on the interpretation of communication. In communication, a listener usually has a number of contextual assumptions that can be used to interpret an utterance. According to relevance theory, the selection of a certain context from a range of potential contexts is determined by the search for relevance (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). Therefore, when a listener is confronted with an utterance, the listener searches for the contextual information that can maximize the relevance of the communication, and selects that contextual information to interpret the communication. Context helps the listener to make assumptions about the speaker's intention in the communication. Therefore, successful communication relies on the correct selection of context for the utterance interpretation.

2.3 Xiangsheng and Stand-up Comedy

Humor is defined as the tendency to cause amusement and provoke laughter (Scheel and Gockel, 2017), and has proven to have significant mental, physical, and social benefits (Lyttle, 2007; Scheel and Gockel, 2017). Humor, especially verbal humor, plays a key role in producing the hilarious effect of comedy. Among the various types and forms of humor, xiangsheng in China and stand-up comedy in Western countries are the most representative verbal humor performances.

2.3.1 Xiangsheng

Xiangsheng, known as crosstalk or comic dialogue, is a traditional folk performing art, and one of the most popular comedy genres in Chinese culture. There is a traditional and standard format and form for xiangsheng performance. It is most commonly performed as a dialogue between two actors, or sometimes as a one-actor monologue by a solo actor (similar to most forms of Western stand-up comedy), or even rarely, as a group act by multiple actors. Xiangsheng is composed of 4 core skills: speaking, imitating, teasing, and singing. The xiangsheng language, rich in puns and allusions, is typically delivered in Mandarin Chinese with a strong northern accent. The acts usually include singing, Chinese rapping, and playing musical instruments. Figure 1 presents the xiangsheng “Hu Kou Xia Xiang” performed in 2017 Spring Festival Gala.



Fig. 1. Xiangsheng performance

2.3.2 Stand-up Comedy

As one of the most popular comedy genres in Western countries, stand-up comedy is a humorous expression and narrative craft in a form of comedy performance whereby a performer speaks directly to the audience with a microphone. Unlike xiangsheng, stand-up comedy is most commonly a dialogic monologue. The performer of stand-up comedy is known as a comedian. The stage setup for stand-up comedy is simple: most commonly, only a microphone, unsupported by elaborate costumes and props, is included in the performance. Stand-up comedy performance usually includes one-liners, stories, or a shtick that may incorporate props, music, magic tricks or ventriloquism (Pinto et al., 2015; Stebbins, 1990). Figure 2 presents a performance of stand-up comedy from “Tuo Kou Xiu Da Hui”.



Fig. 2. Stand-up comedy performance

2.3.3 Similarities and Differences between Xiangsheng and Stand-up Comedy

As spoken comedy, xiangsheng and stand-up comedy share many similarities, which are highlighted below.

- (1) As with xiangsheng, the use of elaborate props or costumes is not encouraged in stand-up comedy. The stage setup for xiangsheng performance and stand-up comedy performance typically consists of nothing but microphones for the performers, although tables and simple props such as musical instruments and Chinese fans may be used in xiangsheng performance.
- (2) Performance is focused on language itself, such as puns, rhymes etc.

Both xiangsheng and stand-up comedy focus on the delivery of spoken words to create humor, but there are three key differences between them.

- (1) The most common form of xiangsheng performance is a two-performer dialogue, although there are occasionally one-performer and multi-performer dialogue. The leading performer is called Dougen (逗哏) and the supporting performer is called Penggen (捧哏). On the other hand, stand-up comedy typically involves only one performer doing a monologue directly to the audience.
- (2) The core of the xiangsheng performance is on-site interaction, which is why it is mostly performed by two or more actors. Stand-up comedy is different. The basis of a stand-up comedy performance is the script. While there may be a few improvised lines, most of the show is made up of well-rehearsed comedy routines.

- (3) Traditional skits are often updated and reused in xiangsheng performance while it's relatively rare in Western stand-up comedy to update a classic skit to a modern version and reuse it.

2.4 Humor Production

Several studies have previously analyzed the humor production mechanism using Grice's maxims (Yus, 2003). According to these studies, the humorous effect can be achieved via intentionally violating Grice's maxims, especially the maxim of quantity and relation (Attardo, 1993; Attardo, 2010; Chiaro, 2006; Yus, 2003). However, these studies are far from uncontroversial, and other studies have raised different opinions (Attardo, 1993; Yus, 2003).

Relevance theory is a cognitively-oriented pragmatic theory for understanding utterance interpretation, and aims to interpret verbal and nonverbal input in communications. Relevance theory is not developed specific for humor research, but as a theory of both cognition and communication, it is appropriate to be used to analyze humor (Yus, 2016). Arthur Schopenhauer proposes a more specific version of the incongruity theory for humor, suggesting that humor is derived from a failure of a concept to account for an object of thought (Schopenhauer, 2016). When the particular outstrips the general, incongruity occurs and humor emerges from an incongruous outcome of an event for which there is a very specific expectation. It is the violation of the specific expectation that creates humor.

3. Mode and Mechanism of Xiangsheng and Stand-up Comedy in Production of Humor

3.1 The Procedure to Generate Humor in Xiangsheng and Stand-up Comedy

Relevance theory is reasonable for explaining how humor is produced. Interpreting utterance is a procedure of seeking optimal relevance. Audience expectations are the maximal relevance. However, expectations often end up with a discrepancy which is inconsistent with the maximal relevance. The audience must then search for optimal relevance. The procedure of producing humor begins with the maximal relevance and ends with finding the optimal relevance. Thus, humor basically comes from the contrast between the optimal and maximal relevance. The bigger the gap between the maximal relevance and optimal relevance is, the more humorous the effect tends to be.

While listening to xiangsheng or stand-up comedy, the audience puts themselves in the cognitive environment of a comedy-specific context, while performers hold a comedy-specific relaxed attitude; in this context, the performers' utterances are not be taken seriously. Thus, when the audience receives irrelevant verbal information in xiangsheng or in stand-up comedy, they will start to search for the optimal relevance with the comedy-specific assumptions along with some other relevant assumptions from their knowledge or other sources.

Combining relevance theory and Schopenhauer's theory about humor, we suggest that the common way humor is generated by xiangsheng and stand-up comedy is as follows (Figure 3):

- (1) Creating a context.
- (2) Inducing the audience to share a common and specific cognition in this context.
- (3) Making a grotesque viewpoint that contradicts the audience's cognition.
- (4) Achieving humorous effect.

The greater incongruity between expectations and outcomes produces a stronger feeling of humor. Notably, this kind of viewpoint is usually unexpected, but reasonable to the audience.

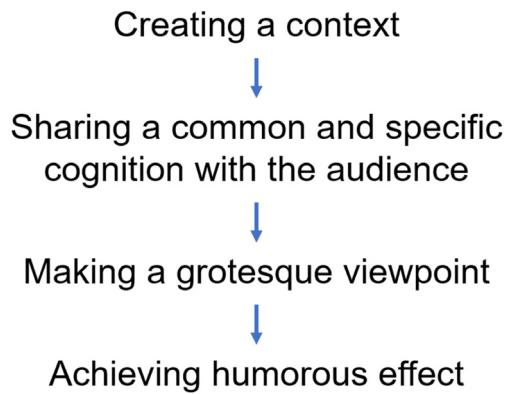


Fig. 3. The procedure of generate humor in xiangsheng and stand-up comedy performances

3.2 Case Study of Humor Production in Xiangsheng

Different styles of acting result in the differences in mode of creating humor between xiangsheng and stand-up comedy. The first step in creating humor is to quickly construct a context to unify the audience's cognition. The ways of constructing context in xiangsheng performance and stand-up comedy performance are different. In xiangsheng performance, the Dougen makes most of the jokes and is more outrageous than the Penggen. In this way, the Penggen represents the audience, listening and reacting. The Penggen tends to be more conservative, and responds to the jokes made by the Dougen. Thus, in a xiangsheng performance, the context is constructed through the communication between the two actors.

To demonstrate the construction of context in xiangsheng performance, consider the following example from “Hu Kou Xia Xiang”:

(1) Dougen: I have a question for you.

Penggen: Please.

Dougen: Have you ever fallen over?

...

Dougen: I fell down to a very serious place.

Penggen: Where?

Dougen: A tiger cage.

Dougen: I went to a zoo to watch the tiger on Sunday. When I was watching and excited, someone pushed forward and screamed: “The tiger is out of the cage!” He pushed me down from the wall.

In this example, the Dougen quickly constructed the context by asking the Pengen a question and told the audience the story of what happened in the tiger cage.

After constructing context, the jokes in the xiangsheng performance were produced through the absurd viewpoints made by the Dougen. This is further demonstrated by the following example.

- (2) Dougen: Suddenly I heard a girl's sweet voice: "Hey, let's connect our belts together into a rope, and pull the young man up!"
Penggen: That's a good idea!
Dougen: This girl was so pretty!
Penggen: Huh? How can you have this kind of thought even at that moment?

In this example, the Dougen contemplated the physical attractiveness of the girl, even while he was trapped in a tiger cage. The audience would expect the Dougen to be very anxious in the tiger cage. However, the Dougen wasn't worried about himself at all, instead concentrating on the physical appearance of the girl. This utterance produces incongruity between expectations and outcomes, resulting in the feeling of humor. The core of humor generation in xiangsheng lies in the different cognitions held by the two actors. The cognition of the Penggen is the same as that of the audience, while the Dougen holds a very different cognition. On the one hand, the Penggen helps the Dougen to construct and introduce the context; on the other hand, the Dougen and Penggen induce the audience to share the same cognition under the context. After all the contextual preparations are completed, the Dougen makes a grotesque viewpoint that contradicts the audience's cognition to produce humor.

We can see this effect in further dialogue from "Hu Kou Xia Xiang".

- (3) Dougen: If I was married, I wouldn't go to watch the tiger on Sunday alone.
Penggen: Why?
Dougen: How? Go ask the guys who are married. Who can avoid doing chores at their mother-in-law's house on Sunday?

In this example, the Dougen attributed this experience to his marital status, because if he was married, he would have been working at his mother-in-law's house on Sunday. The Penggen didn't understand what marriage had to do with going to the zoo on Sunday; neither did the audience. But the Dougen held a very different cognition and insisted that being single was responsible for his falling into the tiger cage. This utterance sounds ridiculous and produces incongruity between expectations and outcomes, resulting in a feeling of humor. Of course, the Dougen's viewpoint is unexpected but reasonable to the audience.

The next example is from "Xin Hu Kou Xia Xiang" performed in 2017 (Figure 4). "Xin Hu Kou Xia Xiang" is the sequel to "Hu Kou Xia Xiang" performed in 1987 (Figure 1). This is a typical example of "updating and reusing a classic skit" mentioned in Section 2.3.3.

- (4) Host: Dear friends, the famous xiangsheng performers, Jiang Kun and Tang Jiezhong shared a xiangsheng on the stage of the 1987 Spring Festival Gala. I would like to ask who remembers the name of the xiangsheng they performed in that year?

Audience: “Hu Kou Xia Xiang”!

Host: You do remember. Oh, it is true that “Hu Kou Xia Xiang” is a classic xiangsheng of the Spring Festival Gala. Time flies! Thirty years have passed. Hey, I have an idea. Let’s welcome Jiang Kun to perform the classic xiangsheng again on this stage, thirty years later.

Audience: Good!



Fig. 4. Xiangsheng “Xin Hu Kou Xia Xiang” performed in 2017

In this example, the host took part in the xiangsheng performance and constructed the context by asking the audience whether they remember the classic “Hu Kou Xia Xiang” performance thirty years ago. In this way, the audience quickly understood that this xiangsheng was the sequel of “Hu Kou Xia Xiang” and put themselves in a specific context with a certain cognition.

(5) Dougen: I fell into the tiger cage again, thirty years from the first time.

Penggen: Hmm.

Dougen: There were a lot of people there. I don’t think anyone took off their belts!

Penggen: What were they doing then?

Dougen: Taking pictures of me! They couldn’t be bothered to help me out!

Penggen: Do you know why they took your picture?

Dougen: Why?

Penggen: To post them to their social media.

Dougen: They were talking to me while taking pictures.

Penggen: What were they saying?

Penggen: They said, “Hey! Turn around and take a pose!”

In this example, the audience expected the people around the tiger cage to find a way to pull the Dougen out of the

cage. However, the Dougen said the people around him weren't helping him out because they were busy taking pictures of him. What had happened is different from what the audience expected. As a result, incongruity is produced and a humorous effect is achieved.

3.3 Case Study of Humor Production in Stand-up Comedy

Compared with xiangsheng, stand-up comedy is performed by only one actor, lacking interaction between two speakers; therefore, both construction of the context and raising an absurd idea are directly done to the audience by the actor. The humor production procedure of stand-up comedy can be demonstrated using the following example from "Tuo Kou Xiu Da Hui".

- (6) Stand-up comedy actor: This is my first time participating in an online show. I am very excited and attached great importance to this show. As you can see, I even permmed my hair for this show. Actually, I didn't intend to perm my hair. Two days ago, I planned to get a haircut to record this show. In the barber shop, the barber asked me, "What kind of hair style would you like?" I said I want to keep the two sides of my hair long, and he told me that the length of my hair was suitable for a perm. I said, "I have no plans to perm it, I simply want to leave my hair long." I said, "You just cut it for me first." After the cut, the barber was very confident about my hair style and asked me, "How do you like it?" I said, "I think I need to perm it!"

In this example, the actor directly told the audience that the episode happened in a barber shop. After the haircut, he wasn't satisfied with his new hairstyle. Instead of saying, "I'm not satisfied", he said he would like to perm it, while the audience expected that would simply tell the barber that he didn't like the new hairstyle. Both the context and absurd viewpoint were directly told to the audience without interacting with a partner. Nevertheless, the basic method of producing humor is the same with that of xiangsheng. The following is another example.

- (7) Stand-up comedy actor: My looks fit the requirements of being a comedian. After I became an artist, I experienced things I'd never expected. For example, I participated in a live broadcast for selling things some time ago, and I just went there with my bag. The receptionist chatted with me enthusiastically. At the end of the chat, he asked me, "When will the artist arrive?" Things went wrong when the director told me what I would sell in the live broadcast. The director said, "The products you are going to sell today are some cosmetics." The buyers left a lot of comments. None of the comments were about the cosmetics, they were all question marks. I was so confused, and I asked the director, "Sir, what effects of these cosmetics do you want me to present with my face? Side effects?"

In this example, the stand-up comedy actor also directly told the audience that the episode happened during a live broadcast. After he arrived, the receptionist was very enthusiastic, but the receptionist didn't know the actor was the artist he was waiting for. The audience expected the receptionist to recognize the actor as the artist. Then, although the actor isn't good-looking, the director arranged for him to sell products that require good looks the most. The comedian

then asked whether the effects that the director wanted to demonstrate were “side effects”, producing incongruity between expectations and outcomes. All these incongruities were unexpected but reasonable, leading to the production of humor. The following is another example.

- (8) Stand-up comedy actor: One of my colleagues, a good-looking guy, told me he is color blind. I’m color blind, too. When I knew he is color blind, I realized that color blindness can be divided not only into red-green color blindness and blue-yellow color blindness, but also into good-looking color blindness and ordinary-looking color blindness.

In this example, the stand-up comedy actor mentioned his good-looking colleague and color blindness. The audience quickly understood this context is related to appearance and color blindness, and searched for relevance. After constructing the context, the actor made a absurd viewpoint by telling the audience something contrary to common sense which is color blindness can be divided into good-looking color blindness and ordinary-looking color blindness, resulting in humor. The following is another example from “Tuo Kou Xiu Da Hui”.

- (9) Stand-up comedy actor: I fell in love with a girl after I became famous. I didn’t expect my relationship to be so shocking to my friends. When my friends heard that I was in love, they asked me, “Do you really have a girlfriend?” My girlfriend and I were introduced by a common friend. The friend told my girlfriend, “The guy I’m about to introduce is not good-looking”. I asked my girlfriend, “What do you like about me?” She said, “You make me very happy on that day.” My girlfriend is always worried that our relationship may affect my popularity. She asked me, “Does our relationship affect your popularity among your fans?” I told her, “Do you think my fans like me to be in a relationship with me? My fans are like you, they like me just for fun.”

In this example, the stand-up comedy actor mentioned his girl friend. Then, the audience knew the context of this story was about his relationship. When his girl friend asked him a question about his popularity among his fans, the audience expected an answer that the relationship might have some negative effects on his career since he is a famous comedian. However he answered that his fans don’t care about the relationship because they like him just for fun. This utterance produces incongruity between expectations and outcomes, resulting in a hilarious effect.

4. Conclusion

In this study, we compared and analyzed the humor generation mode and mechanism of xiangsheng and stand-up comedy using relevance theory. Relevance theory is a cognitively-oriented pragmatic theory for understanding utterance interpretation, and aims to interpret verbal and nonverbal input in communications. Although relevance theory is not developed specific for humor research, it is appropriate to be used to analyze humor. According to relevance theory, interpreting utterance is a procedure of seeking optimal relevance. Audience expectations are the maximal relevance. However, expectations often end up with a discrepancy which is inconsistent with the maximal

relevance and the audience must then search for optimal relevance. The procedure of humor production begins with the maximal relevance and ends with finding the optimal relevance. Thus, humor basically comes from the contrast between the optimal relevance and maximal relevance. The bigger the gap between the maximal relevance and optimal relevance is, the more humorous effect tends to be produced. The audience put themselves in the cognitive environment of a comedy-specific context while listening to xiangsheng or stand-up comedy. Thus, when the audience receives irrelevant verbal information in xiangsheng or in stand-up comedy, they will start to search for the optimal relevance with the comedy-specific assumptions along with some other relevant assumptions from their knowledge or other sources.

Arthur Schopenhauer proposes a more specific version of the incongruity theory for humor, suggesting that humor is derived from a failure of a concept to account for an object of thought. Combining relevance theory and Schopenhauer's theory about humor, we suggest that the common procedure to generate humor in xiangsheng and stand-up comedy is: (1) creating a context, (2) inducing the audience to share a common and specific cognition in this context, (3) making a grotesque viewpoint that contradicts the audience's cognition, and (4) achieving humorous effect. The greater incongruity between expectations and outcomes produces a stronger feeling of humor. It is worth noting that this kind of viewpoint is usually unexpected, but reasonable to the audience. Conversely, different ways of performing lead to differences in mode of creating the context in xiangsheng and stand-up comedy. In xiangsheng performance, the context is constructed through the communication between the Penggen and Dougen. Meanwhile, the context is directly constructed by a single actor communicating directly to the audience in stand-up comedy.

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