A Relevance Theoretic-based Approach to Verbal Humor in Joe Wong's Talk Show

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Abstract

As a pragmatic theory of human communication, Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber & Wilson has some hypotheses which are suited to interpret how humorous effects are created in verbal communication. In this paper, RT is used to analyze how and why verbal humor in Joe Wong's talk show is produced. We find that the mutual cognitive environments of addresser and addressees form the preconditions for the successful realization of verbal humor. RT views human communication as an ostensive-inferential process. In nature verbal humor communication is also an ostensive-inferential process. Skilled humorists always design delicately their joke points and try to make their utterances ostensive to audiences who show maximal relevance expectation to those humorists' manifest stimulus. However, between the maximal relevance expectation and the optimal relevance exists a gap which causes audiences to search for the optimal relevance devised by humorists by paying more processing effort which can be rewarded to achieve humorous effects.

Keywords: verbal humor, talk show, maximal relevance, optimal relevance, cognitive environment

1. Introduction

Joe Wong, the China-born American comedian, has gained a good reputation for the performance in his humorous talk show. His success, to a great extent, is attributed to the humor conveyed by his utterances, which amuse those audiences and make them laugh. From the perspective of linguistics, Wong's humor falls within the scope of verbal humor which is defined as the humor "conveyed or expressed by means of a linguistic system" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 28). Scholars have conducted studies on verbal humor in their own research domains, such as philosophy, psychology, linguistics and so on. The realization of verbal humor is also a cognitive process, namely, an ostensive-inferential process, therefore, "there must be a cognitive foundation for the successful realization of verbal humor" (Jin & Wang, 2010, p. 86).

What is the cognitive nature of verbal humor communication? What is the cognitive elicitation mechanism of verbal humor? In order to answer the above questions, we need to find an appropriate theory within which our study can be carried out.

As a cognitive theory of communication, the Relevance theory (hereinafter abbreviated as RT) treats utterance interpretation as a cognitive process. Relevance Theory has been applied successfully to different types of discourse, among which humorous text is paid great attention to. "The predictability of which interpretation is consistent with the principle of relevance can be useful for creators of humorous texts"(Yus, 1998, p. 332).The study of humor can provide us with some linguistic insight into the interactive powers that we employ in our social communication either humorously or non-humorously, and with some pragmatic techniques we can make reference to. Based on Wong's humorous utterances in his talk show, the study attempts to explore into the cognitive nature and elicitation mechanism of verbal humor within the framework of RT.

2. Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory put forward by Sperber and Wilson can be understood as a cognitive approach to the study of human communication. Within the framework of RT, human communication is viewed as an ostensive-inferential process which is defined as follows:

Ostensive-inferential communication: the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions. Sperber and Wilson (2001) put forward that a communicator who produces an ostensive stimulus is trying to fulfill two intentions: first, the informative intention which is to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions; second, the communicative intention which is to make it mutually manifest to audience and communicator that the communicator has this informative intention. The audience is supposed to make reaction to the manifested stimulus, namely to make inference. The audience's inference can fill "the gap between the semantic representation of an utterance and what this utterance actually communicates" (Sperber &Wilson, 1987, p. 697). Once the communicator's communicative intention is recognized by the audience, the communication succeeds.

3. The Elicitation Mechanism of Verbal Humor in Joe Wong's Talk Show

3.1 Preconditions for Successful Realization of Wong's Verbal Humor: Mutual Cognitive Environment

In Joe Wong's performance, two parties—Joe Wong and the audiences—form a communication circle. Joe Wong provides evidence of his intention to convey certain humorous meanings, which is then inferred by his audiences on the basis of the evidence presented. However, the audiences cannot process and interpret the humorist's utterances without recourse to contextual information. In other words, Joe Wong's communicative intentions cannot be understood and interpreted by the audiences under these circumstances. Their communication will inevitably end in vain because "successful communication is achieved only if the actual context matches the one envisaged by the speaker" (Blakemore, 1987, p. 28).

Sperber and Wilson put forward a much more dynamic concept of context as a construct which has to be established and developed by the interlocutors in the course of their interaction in order to select the most suitable interpretation: "a context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world" (Sperber & Wilson, 1987, p 698.). S & W lay less emphasis on the external environment of the interlocutors, however, they attach great importance to their "assumption about the world" or cognitive environment. Sperber and Wilson (2001) `believe that any shared cognitive environment in which it is manifest which people share it is what we will call a mutual cognitive environment.

Based on the above illustration, we came to a conclusion that the mutual cognitive environment is the precondition for the realization of the addresser's verbal humor. In the talk show, Joe Wong needs to devise deliberately in his utterances some joke points which can be understood and accepted by his audience. In this sense, it means the humorist, in his cognitive environment, has found and regarded what he had designed as the joke points which could be mapped with that of the audience's cognitive environment. The opening remarks of Joe Wong's talk show at Annual Radio & Television Correspondents' Dinner (2009) are as follows:

Example 1: *"Good evening, everyone. My name is Joe Wong. But to most people, I am known as 'Who?'(Hu?)"* (audience's laughter)

Example 2: *"Hu is actually my mother's maiden name and the answer to my credit card security question."* (audience's laughter)

Example 3: *"But joking aside, I just want to reassure everybody that I am invited here tonight."* (audience's laughter)

Three joke points are designed by Joe Wong in these above three examples: *Who (Hu), the answer to the credit card security question, and I am invited.* "For the most part, the mutual cognitive environment is simply the thoughts shared by the speaker and hearer, that is, the thoughts they both believe, coupled with each assuming that the other holds those thoughts"(Weber, 2005, p. 52). Joe Wong is a China-born American comedian, so he uses Homophonic puns *Who (Hu)* to convey one of his intentions to the audiences that he is a Chinese. Joe Wong assumes that his audience is assured to know Chairman Hu Jintao is the top leader of China. On hearing *Who (Hu),* those audiences, in the beginning, interpret the word as the one without any fame and known to the very few. However, Joe Wong makes it manifest to the audience by stressing the word *Who (Hu),* then they start to process the communicative clue by searching relevant knowledge in their own encyclopedia information. When they succeed in matching *Hu* with Chairman Hu, the addresser's communicative intention is realized and humorous effects are achieved. If the audiences know no information about the Chinese leader, namely, if the speaker and hearer share no mutual cognitive environment, there would be some misunderstanding among the hearers. In that case Joe Wong's utterance could be misinterpreted as the blame to the audiences because they show no concern to the speaker and the verbal communication would achieve no success.

During the process of communication, "speakers are open to a great amount of contextual information and

assumptions which are mutually manifest to both, and therefore a mutually manifest cognitive environment is created" (Yus Ramos, 1998, p. 310). The American citizens are quite familiar with their credit card security system in which security question is needed to choose and the answer to set. For example, *what is your mother's family name?* is one of the security questions frequently used. The audiences laugh when they hear the addresser's announcement of the answer to his credit card security question because they know it must be a joke made by the speaker. Joe Wong seriously declares he is invited at the dinner party that night because he knows a couple, Michaele and Tareq Salahi slipped into the White House to crash the state dinner in 2009 and he also strongly believes his audiences of whom most are correspondents could know of that event. During the course of his communication with the audiences, Joe Wong takes his hearers' identification into consideration and establishes a series of manifest contextual information and assumptions, and therefore a mutually manifest cognitive environment is created among the speaker and hearers. So the audiences could make appropriate inferences and grasp the speaker's humorous communicative intentions, meanwhile they are amused.

From what has been discussed above, we can conclude that mutual cognitive environment plays a very important role in verbal communication. Whether or not verbal humor can be realized largely depends on the communicators' shared cognitive context. Only when humorists are aware of this precondition and devise deliberately joke points, can it be possible to realize the humorous effect that they are eager to create.

3.2 Gap between Maximal Relevance Expectation and Optimal Relevance

Two principles were proposed by Sperber and Wilson: a first, or cognitive principle of relevance, and a second, or communicative principle of relevance.

a. Cognitive principle of relevance: *Human cognition tends to be geared to maximization of relevance.* b. Communicative principles of relevance: *Every utterance (or every act of ostensive communication) communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance.*

In verbal communication which is viewed by S & W as an ostensive-inferential process, maximal relevance means that inference is made when the audience pays as least effort as possible to obtain as most contextual effects as possible, but Huang (2007, p. 186) states that "there is generally an ostensive stimulus, the use of which gives rise to an expectation of a particular level of relevance which S & W call optimal relevance".

During the course of the talk show, those audiences have the maximal relevance expectation of joke points made by Joe Wong, which could be put into other ways that those audiences expect to pay the least processing effort to realize the most humorous contextual effects and be amused. However, if the joke point is exactly the realization of the audiences' maximal expectation, there would be less psychological stimuli to them, and no humorous contextual effects would be created.

Example 4: *"I am honored to meet vice president Joe Biden here tonight. I actually read autobiography of you. And today I see you. I think the book is much better." (audiences' laughter)*

Example 5: *"You see I am married now. But I used to be really scared about marriage…Wow, 50% of all marriages end up lasting forever." (audiences' laughter)*

In example 4 and 5, Wong shows his honor to vice president in the beginning and tells the audiences he has read Biden's autobiography, and expresses his worries about marriage. Under most circumstances, the maximal relevance expectation of addressee's conforms to their usual way of thinking because they have formed some assumption schemas through daily cognition in their encyclopedia knowledge. In the audiences' expectation, Joe Wong is supposed to say "I think Biden himself is better than what has been described in his autobiography" and "Wow, 50% of all marriages end up divorcing". If Joe Wong did that, there would be no humorous effects. He conveys his humorous message by searching for the optimal relevant utterance. So the gap between the maximal relevance expectation (on addressee's side) and the optimal relevance (on addresser's side) is formed and it is the gap that creates humor, and therefore the addressees are amused.

Why does the gap between the maximal relevance expectation and the optimal relevance create humor? Two factors are embodied in relevance: cognitive effects (contextual effects) and processing effort. Huang (2007) asserts, "the first factor is the outcome of an interaction between a newly impinging stimulus and a subset of the assumptions that are already established in a cognitive system; but the second factor is the effort a cognitive system must expend in order to yield a satisfactory interpretation of any incoming information processed" (p. 183). The addressee follows a path of least effort in accessing and testing different interpretations, which means the addressee makes attempts to maximize context effects while minimizing processing efforts. However, there is a gap in some cases between the maximal relevance expectation and the optimal relevance. That needs addressees to pay more efforts to process the input and these additional efforts are not wasted but are rewarded to

help the addressees to achieve humorous effects. Let us analyze the following two examples.

Example 6: *"Who is Benjamin Franklin? We were like…, Ah…, the reason our convenient store gets robbed? What's the second amendment? We were like…, Ah…, the reason our convenient store gets robbed?" (audiences' laughter)*

Example 7: *"And like many other immigrants, we wanted our son to become the president of this country. We try to make him bilingual, Chinese at home and English in the public. I said, 'Son, once you become the president of the United States, you will have to sign legislative bills in English, and …talk to debt collectors in Chinese'." (audiences' laughter)*

Joe Wong indirectly conveys his informative and communicative intentions by saying *"the reason our convenient store gets robbed?"* and *"talk to debt collectors in Chinese."* Neither of these utterances strengthens relevance to their previous utterances, which causes the audiences to pay additional efforts to process them and find out the causes for accidental irrelevance. The audiences think Joe Wong's utterances must be of optimal relevance to some extent and worth being paid effort to process them. So they make a series of assumptions:

(1) Benjamin Franklin was a great politician and scientist and his image is printed on US paper currency.

(2) Benjamin Franklin is used to substitute US dollars (money)

(3) The second amendment is the one to American Constitution.

(4) The second amendment regulates "a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed".

(5) So arms are available to the robbers and they can carry guns to break into a convenience store and initiate a robbery.

The audiences realize, after making these above interpretations, that Joe Wong delicately connect Benjamin Franklin and the second amendment with robbery into convenience stores. The audiences applaud for Joe Wong's special perspectives of understanding American historical figure and event. After paying additional effort, the audiences have resolved the inconsistency and incongruity of Joe Wong's utterances and obtained his communicative intention. So audience's processing efforts are rewarded by realizing the addresser's communicative intentions and getting amusement. Therefore, we can conclude that such a gap between the maximal relevance expectation and the optimal relevance gives a strong psychological stimulus to audiences' minds and makes them feel humorous effect of Joe Wong's talk show.

4. Conclusion

Humor plays a significant role in people's daily communication. Joe Wong's talk show abounds in a lot of humors which are appreciated and widely accepted by American audiences. We can analyze Wong's verbal humor from a cognitive perspective and explore into the reasons why his utterances create so huge humorous effects. The addresser and the addressees share mutual cognitive environment, which paves the way to the successful realization of the humorous intentions. Meanwhile there exists a cognitive mechanism behind the realization of verbal humor. The gap between the maximal relevance expectation and the optimal relevance forms a psychological stimulus to addressees' minds, which causes them to pay more efforts to make relevant interpretations of the addresser's utterances. The more processing efforts are made by addressees, the more contextual effects can be achieved. When addressees make relevant and appropriate interpretations, they find the joke points and are entertained—to laugh—by realizing addresser's communicative intentions. This present paper also proves that some theoretical hypotheses of RT are suited to deal with how humorous interpretations are generated.

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