A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON CHINESE AND ENGLISH VERBAL HUMOR FROM A PERSPECTIVE OF RELEVANCE THEORY

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON CHINESE AND ENGLISH VERBAL HUMOR FROM A
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Abstract

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Under the Supervision of Kory Wein, Ph.D.

The term *humor* derives from the medical ideas of the ancient Greeks, who taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as *humourous* (Latin: *húmor*, "body fluid"), control human health and emotion. The study of humor has been popular for thousands of years. With the development of semantics, social linguistics, and pragmatics, specialists who are interested in humor employ different aspects of language to study it. Even so, it is still hard to find a universally agreed definition for *humor*.

This paper, based on relevance theory, provides a comparison of Chinese verbal humor with English verbal humor to investigate the reasons people laugh and the factors affecting our comprehension of humor. In 1986, Sperber and Wilson proposed relevance theory, which analyzes human communication from two principles: the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. The cognitive principle stresses that the essence of communication is cognition in that human cognitive processes are geared to achieve the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing effort. The communicative principle emphasizes that every communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (p. 158).

By analyzing English and Chinese verbal humor from the aspect of relevance theory, one can conclude that ostensive messages, cognitive environment, and the optimal relevance principle can affect people’s communication and recognition. The violation of optimal relevance
principle in communication can produce humor in both English and Chinese languages. Also, cognitive differences can affect the processing of communication, which may produce humor.

Relevance theory plays an effective and important part in analyzing Chinese and English verbal humor, which in turn helps specialists and learners have a better understanding of humor and the study of humor. Scholars should further study the relationship among cognitive factors and the optimal relevance principle. Additionally, culture acquisition is essential in language acquisition. As a result, how to use humor to teach English language and improve the efficiency of language learning should be studied in the future.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Can you imagine a world without humor? Humor is universally accepted as a rare and treasured resource, which can light up people’s lives. Also, humor is considered to be the essence of human culture. The word humor originates from Latin, and there has been a long history of people studying the concept. Usually, students of the subject divide humor into verbal humor, visual humor and physical humor. “Verbal humor is a phenomenon prevalent in everyday and media discourses, occurring in various contexts and manifesting itself in an array of forms” (Dynel, 2008, p.1).

Although people all over the world enjoy different kinds of humor daily, a joke in one culture may not be a joke in another culture. As a result, it is necessary to understand and appreciate humor from a scientific perspective. With the development of the theories of semantics, pragmatics and social linguistics, specialists have found an increasing number of approaches to studying humor. With the development of the concept of pragmatics, there is a better understanding of humor from the perspective of relevance theory. Specialists in the theory, (e.g., Sperber and Wilson, 2001) have argued that the process of communication is also the process of pursuing relevance. Consequently, relevance theory can help students of humor investigate the nature of verbal humor.

According to Qian Suoqiao (2007), the word humor in Chinese, youmo, was introduced to China by Lin Yutang as a way to mediate and appropriate cultural meaning and understanding between East and West. (Before his work, circa 1924, there was no such word in China.) In a sense, there is a kind of relationship between Chinese verbal humor and English verbal humor. The purpose of this paper is to report the relevant literature and to compare Chinese verbal
humor with English verbal humor from the perspective of relevance theory. The process will help to find the differences and similarities between the two cultures and contribute to the understanding of humor in these two languages.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem to be addressed is, What are the similarities and differences between Chinese and English verbal humor from the perspective of relevance theory?

**Definition of Terms**

*Humor*

“A frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life. It is a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view and one which has great therapeutic power” (Mindess, 1970, p. 94).

“A form of communication with an intent to amuse, including special cognitive and emotional characteristics, that causes a physiological reaction” (Ziv, 1998, p. 223).

*Relevance theory*

“Proposed by Sperber and Wilson in their work *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (1986/2007), and developed from the foundation of Grecian Pragmatics. They claim that the principles governing inferential communication have their source in some basic facts about human cognition. Students of humor typically pay attention to the most relevant phenomena available, construct the most relevant possible representations of these phenomena, and process these representations in a context that maximizes their relevance” (Ma Yonghong, 2007, p. 7).

**Delimitations of Research**

The research was conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville. Primary searches were conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, CNKI database and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “humor,” “relevance theory,” and “verbal humor.”
Method of Approach

A brief review of literature on the studies of verbal humor and relevance theory was conducted. Also a review of literature relating humor and pragmatics was conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations made.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Origin and definitions of humor

It seems a mission impossible to tell exactly and completely what humor is, and specialists from different fields try to define humor from their particular or respective points of view. As for the field of etymology, *humor* is a word deriving from Latin with the same spelling, which means moisture or fluids. In the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance period, people believed that there were four humors of body: yellow bile, black bile, blood and phlegm, all of which could determine the temperament of a person. Such an idea can be traced from some expressions still in use today, such as “good humored,” “in a black mood,” “yellow-livered,” etc. According to Qian Suoqiao (2007), the word *humor* in Chinese, *youmo*, was introduced to China by Lin Yutang as a way to mediate and appropriate cultural meaning and understanding between East and West. *Youmo* has a similar pronunciation to *humor*, and it originated from a poem in the Han Dynasty. *Youmo* in ancient Chinese means silence, but now it means humor because of Lin Yutang’s introduction.

When it comes to the field of psychology, humor always connects with laughter, though not all humors can cause laughter. Also, sometimes laughter may have no relation with happiness or joy. Laughter can serve as a way to hide one’s feelings such as anger or shame. Raskin (1985) holds that laughter often serves as a defense mechanism to mask certain uncomfortable feelings.

Physiologically speaking, humor is shown with the form of laughter. Darvin (1872) proposes that laughter is produced by “a deep inspiration followed by short, interrupted, spasmodic contractions of the chest, and especially of the diaphragm” (p. 202). McGhee (1979) also points out that “we become increasingly aroused as we listen to the development of a joke; once we get
the point of the joke, arousal decreases and we simile or laugh” (p. 17). People believe that humor helps to build harmonious atmosphere. Even in ancient China, people held that humor or laughter could keep people young.

As for the definitions offered by humorists over so the years, there is no one definition that can satisfy all the scholars. Apte (1985) argues that it is impossible to have a global anthropological theory of humor and laughter. McGhee (1979) believes that there is no agreement on how humor should be defined and there is no agreement on how appreciation of comprehension should be determined.

Although definitions meeting all needs of scholars are unavailable, some definitions do partially tell the nature of humor. Mindess (1970) defined it as “a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view and one which has great therapeutic power” (p. 36). Ziv wrote (1998), “Humor is a form of communication with an intent to amuse, including special cognitive and emotional characteristics, that causes a physiological reaction” (p. 5). Lin Yutang (2002) said, “In its broader sense, humor is a popular art form to express one’s viewpoints and even perception of the real world.” (从广义来讲，幽默是一种表达个人观点，甚至是对现实世界洞察的艺术形式 p. 49)

Classification of humor

There are many different kinds of humor according to various standards. Sherzer (1987) classified jokes into riddle jokes, narrative jokes, dirty jokes and interracial jokes according to their contents and structures. Bergson (1899) categorized humor into two major groups: situational humor and verbal humor. Situational humor is a kind of humor that depends a lot on the situation. It is the concrete situation that causes people to laugh, such as cartoon, farce, etc.
Verbal humor, according to Raskin (1985) is the humor expressed and created through language. It is the language that produces a funny stimulus. In verbal humor, there should be a speaker and one or more listeners. Verbal humor plays a main part in humor study today, and thus this paper will focus on the study of verbal humor.

In China, the most popular forms of humor are sketch, crosstalk, and song and dance duet, all of which belong to verbal humor. Sketch is a well-known form of humor in China because it is the most important part of Chinese Spring Festival Evening Gala, which attracts an audience of about one billion in China every year. Sketch in nature is like a mini play, whose themes usually reflect social problems and concerns. Normally, there are less than five actors in a sketch. The actors can use a mixed form of performance, such as talk show, singing, dancing, etc. Cross talk is a traditional art form of humor in China, which appeared in about 1870. In cross talk, two performers serve different roles: one is the leading role (逗哏); while the other is the supporting role (捧哏). The leading role usually tells stories and controls the development of the show, while the supporting role always gives responses and comments on the leading role’s stories. The cross talk can also include singing, performing, imitating etc in the performance. As for song and dance duet, which is a local opera of north-east of China to show the regional culture of the North-East in China. The performers of the song and dance duet must comprise a male and a female (usually they are couple), and the male is in charge of the talk show and Juehuo (unique skills); the female is in charge of singing and dancing. Sometimes, dirty jokes and adult jokes can be included in such performances.

Also, there are many other forms of humor in China, and a case in point is Shanghai Style Talk Show, the feature of which is that jokes and humor are expressed in Shanghai dialect. Also,
Shanghai style Talk Show pays more attention to the culture, life, changes, and problems of Shanghai.

**Functions of humor**

Humor can lighten people’s life; humor can soften the severe tension; humor can make people feel closer; humor can show wisdom. Both Western and Chinese society place great emphasis on humor, which is practiced and appreciated for nearly every class of society in every age.

Socially speaking, humor can help to build a harmonious relationship among people. People enjoy humor for the fun that it may bring. Charlie Chaplin, Mark Twain, George Carlin, Lin Yutang, and Zhao Benshan are but a few people who share great fame in America or China for the laughter they bring to people. And humor can bring peace, enjoyment and release to people. What is interesting is that many specialists believe that humor today serves as a reflection of social conflicts and problems. Presently, social injustice and problems take the sarcastic or exaggerative form of humor to inspire people’s serious reflection on them. Also, humor is held to be an effective weapon to fight against embarrassing situations.

Psychologically speaking, humor can bring hope and strength when one may be facing adversity or misfortune. Mark Twain, the well-known American author and humorist, used humor to combat a difficult situation in his life after he lost his daughter and his wife. Another example is the “coke boy” in the Wenchuan earthquake. When the boy was pulled from the ruins after having been buried for two days, he said eagerly to the rescuers, “Give me some cold coke.” His words impressed those soldiers and volunteers to help and save more people in the earthquake. Another example is that when a doctor asked a badly wounded man if he was
allergic to anything; he said loudly, “I am allergic to bullets.” His words showed his courage and his hope for life, which could in turn help the doctors and nurses to save his life.

Humor is considered to be a symbol of wisdom and insight of the world. Lin Yutang (1949) argued that humor is part of life, and humor literature appears when the culture of a certain country reaches a certain point. Daoism and Confucius are the symbols of wisdom in China, and in which many specialists found humor. In Zheng feng (郑风) (one chapter of ancient Chinese poems Shijing, which was written before 600 B.C), humor could be found in a girl’s words: “if you don’t love me, can’t I find other guys?” (子不我思，豈無他人). Abraham Lincoln was widely admired and respected in America for his wisdom. Once a diplomat came to visit him, and finding the president polishing his shoes, he asked, “Mr. President, are you polishing your own shoes?” “Yes, sir,” said President Lincoln, “whose shoes do you polish?” Humor can earn people fame and respect for the wisdom behind it.

Humor also plays an important role in teaching. Humor can contribute to build a safe, relaxed and comfortable atmosphere for learning; thus it can facilitate the process of teaching and learning. According to a research by Wanzer, Frymier, and Irvin,

Both students and professors admit that instructor humor contributes to the classroom environment. Research by Torok, McMorris, and Lin (2004) found that 74% of college students surveyed indicated that they appreciated instructors’ use of humor in the classroom as long as it was used constructively. In addition, when asked if the use of such humor assisted in learning, 40% of respondents indicated that humor “often” facilitated learning and 40% reported that humor “always” aided in learning. (p. 6)

In evaluating over 40 years of research on humor and education, Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Liu (2011) concluded, “The use of positive, nonaggressive humor has been associated with a
more interesting and relaxed learning environment, higher instructor evaluations, greater perceived motivation to learn, and enjoyment of the course” (p. 137). As a result, teachers should try to use humor properly and decently to facilitate their teaching process and improve their teaching efficiency.

Theories of humor

The study of humor boasts a long history, and there are three groups of theories that are commonly accepted by humorists: the superiority theory, the release theory and the incongruity theory.

As a representative of the superiority theory, Hobbes (1904) stressed that “the passion of laughter was the sudden glory arising from the sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly” (p. 34). Thus, the process of creating humor is a process of comparing self to others. Hobbes (1904) also pointed out that people were in a constant competition with others, hunting for the weaknesses of others to make themselves feel better or “sudden glory” (p. 35). By this theory, researchers argued, people laughed at the shortcomings of others.

The release theory is a psychological theory of humor. Raskin (1985) pointed out that laughter provided relief for psychic, nervous, and mental energy. The specialists who agreed with the theory maintained that people live under a great number of constrains, while humor can free human beings from such chains.

The incongruity theory views humor from a cognitive perspective. Foot (1997) believed that the theory stressed the absurd, the unexpected, the inappropriate or out-of-context events as the basis for humor. In other words, the theory treats humor as a kind of frustrated expectation, and
humor is inherent in the incongruity theory. To find humor is to discover incongruity and resolve it. Humorists believe that incongruity is involved in almost all the humors.

**Relevance Theory and its notions**

In 1986, French linguist Sperber and English scholar Wilson published their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, in which a new approach to the study of human communication was presented. In their second edition of the book, Sperber and Wilson (1996) presented that cognitive principle is the first principle of relevance and the essence of communication is cognition, and the human cognitive processes are geared to achieve the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing effort. On the other hand, the communicative principle of relevance emphasized that “every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance” (p. 158).

According to Sperber and Wilson (1996), “An assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context” (p. 122). This definition stressed that an assumption must connect with the context in some way, which is a necessary condition for relevance. A well known example of relevance in their book is the following:

“Flag-seller: would you like to buy a flag for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution?

Passer-by: No thanks, I always spend my holidays with my sister in Birmingham.”

To find the relevance of the passer-by’s answers, the hearer must be able to supply the following premises:

1. Birmingham is inland.
2. The Royal National Lifeboat Institution is a charity.
3. Buying a flag is one way of subscribing to a charity.
4. Someone who spends his holidays inland has no need of the services of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. (p. 121)

As a result, Sperber and Wilson used such an example to show that there is an extremely close connection between seeing the passer-by’s relevance and getting the contextual implication from it—the passer-by can not be expected to subscribe to the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. Relevance theory is based on the definition of relevance and two general principles: the cognitive principle and the communicative principle. The cognitive effects and the processing effort can determine the degree of relevance. Namely, the greater the cognitive effects are, the greater the relevance is; and the smaller the processing effort is, the greater the relevance is.

Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed the term *optimal relevance*, which refers to the adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort. Human cognition is commonly in line with most relevance, so human communication expects the optimal relevance. An utterance is optimally relevant if, and only if, (a) it is at least relevant enough to be worth processing, and (b) it is the most relevant one compatible with speaker’s abilities and preference (p. 270). According to this principle, whenever people begin to communicate something, they communicate with the assumption that what they are going to say is optimally relevant to the audience. Consequently, the pursuit for optimal relevance not only guides the hearer to a speaker-intended context but also to a speaker-intended interpretation (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). Sometimes the breaking of such an optimal relevance may lead to the creation of humor.

**Analysis of verbal humor from the perspective of Relevance Theory**

Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed that humans tend to pursue the greatest possible effects for the smallest possible effort in the process of communication. However, it is common for
communicators to not always give the most relevant possible information. In this case, humor is created for the incongruous predictions. In the process of communication, the hearer gets adequate effects and spontaneously predicts what the speaker is most likely to utter later. However, communication permits the speaker to break the principle of optimal relevance. Sometimes, the speaker is either unwilling or unable to give the most relevant possible information as a presumption of maximal relevance suggests. The speaker prefers to avoid processing the information in the least effort-demanding way. As a result, the utterance finally produced by the speaker is extremely different from or even incongruous with the hearer’s prediction. Then laughter is produced with a sudden awareness that the hearer has been misled or has interpreted the former utterance of the speaker.

**Communicative principle in English and Chinese verbal humor**

Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed that the process of communication can be both code model and inferential model. According to the code model, communication is a process of encoding and decoding messages. However, as for inferential model, the communication is a process in which the communicator provides evidence of his or her intentions and the audience infers the intentions from the evidence. Consequently, humor can happen when the decoding procedure is out of expectation or the audience infers the intention differently. An example from Luna’s blog (2010, 3, 7) is the following:

An old man was interviewed by a journalist. “I understand, sir,” said the journalist, “that you have just celebrated your ninetieth birthday.”

“That is correct. Ninety years of age and I haven’t an enemy in the world.”

“That’s wonderful, sir.”

“Not an enemy in the world. They are all dead!”
“Well, sir. I hope to have the privilege of interviewing you on your one hundredth birthday.”

“I don’t see why not, young man,” said the old man. “You look perfectly fit to me!”

In this joke, there are two sentences that can trigger the readers to laugh. The first sentence is: 

*Not an enemy in the world. They are all dead.* In the context, the old man was expected to tell the audience the “secret” to having no enemy in the world, such as

(a) Never argue with others.

(b) Always have a positive attitude in communicating with others.

(c) Never hesitate to apologize if necessary.

It seems that answers like these can provide the relevance to the question, and answers like these can be easily processed by the listener. However, the old man’s answer—*they are all dead*—seems to break the optimal relevance principle in the communication and it is an answer out of expectancy. Also, the answer offered by the old man reflects his sense of humor for his wisdom and attitude towards life. In this way, the sentence creates humor for the audience. Another sentence producing humor is this: “*I don’t see why not, young man,*” said the old man, “*You look perfectly fit to me!*” With the statement—“Well, sir. I hope to have the privilege of interviewing you on your one hundredth birthday”—the journalist expressed his or her wishes

(a) The old man could live to his one hundredth birthday.

(b) The journalist will interview him again if the old man can live to his one hundredth birthday.

But the old man decoded such wishes differently on purpose:

(a) The journalist is afraid that he doesn’t have the privilege to live to the old man’s one hundredth birthday.
So the old man said, “You look perfectly fit to me!” which produced a sense of irony to cause people to laugh. In the process of communication, human beings tend to pursue the largest relevance with the least effort. Any violation of such an idea in the process of communication may produce humor. In the story, the old man’s answers tend to violate the principle of optimal relevance, and the way he used to decode or infer the messages given by the journalist is unexpected.

In Chinese humor, the process of communication involves the same factors. A case in point is like this:

“Is this the Wuhan stop?” an old lady asked the bus driver.

“这是武汉站吗？”一位老人问司机。

“No, mama,” replied the driver.

“不是，老妈妈”司机回答。

“Well, please tell me when we get there,” she requested.

“如果到站了，告诉我”她说。

“I will do that,” promised the driver.

“好的”司机回答。

Later, the driver forgot it and passed through the stop before he realized it. He apologized to the other passengers, turned around and drove back. Then he said to the old lady:

司机向乘客们道歉，然后回头开向武汉站。到站后，他对老人说:
The old lady: “This is the stop where you wanted to get off.”

“这就是武汉站，你可以下车了”。

“Who wanted to get out?” she asked.

“谁要下车？”老人问。

“You did,” the driver said.

“你呀。”司机回答。

“No,” she said, “My daughter told me when I pass this stop, I should take my pills.”

“不，我女儿告诉我到了武汉站，我该吃药了。”

In this joke, the communication between the driver and the old lady shows the importance of relevance and ostensive messages. What the driver inferred from the old lady’s words “Is this the Wuhan stop” may be

(a) The lady has no idea of where the Wuhan stop is.
(b) The old lady wants to get off at the Wuhan stop.
(c) I should remind her to get off at the Wuhan stop.

But the old lady may think like this:

(a) My daughter told me to take pills at the Wuhan stop.
(b) I should know which stop is the Wuhan stop.
(c) I can ask the bus driver to remind me when it comes up.
So in this Chinese joke, the optimal relevance principle leads to such a humor. The bus
driver tried to process the old lady’s words with the least effort, but the old lady didn’t give him
enough evidence.

**Cognitive principle in English and Chinese verbal humor**

Sperber and Wilson (1986) argued that people’s cognitive environment differs for the
variation of physical environment, perceptual abilities, inferential abilities, memories, etc. An
individual’s total cognitive environment is the set of all the facts that he or she can perceive or
infer. As Sperber and Wilson (1986) defined in their works, “a cognitive environment of an
individual is a set of facts that are manifest to him” (p. 39) As a result, people may infer
differently for the variation of cognitive environments. People may infer the messages given by
the speaker from different aspects for the variation of cognitive environment. Sometimes it is not
so easy to understand humor when it demands a shared cognitive environment.

Joe Wong is well known for his talk show in America, but his words are really hard for
Chinese people to understand or laugh at even though most of them can speak English. That
shows the importance of cognitive environment. Here is one example of Joe Wang’s show
uploaded by DBlow (2009, 4, 18):

> I tried really hard to become an US citizen, and I had to take this American history
lesson... where they ask us questions like Who is Benjamin Franklin? Well, like,
aah...the reason our convenience stores get robbed...What is the Second
Amendment?...Well, like, aah...the reason our convenience stores get robbed...What’s
the Roe vs Wade?...like aah...two ways of coming to the United States...

In this part of the talk show, there are three sentences causing the audience to laugh aloud.
But if the audience is unfamiliar with American laws, it will be impossible for them to laugh.
Firstly, Benjamin Franklin is the reason for the convenience stores getting robbed. In this sentence, the audience should know that the picture on the one hundred dollar bill is Benjamin Franklin. So “Benjamin Franklin” in the sentence stands for money—the reason why the convenience stores are robbed. Also, the answer given by Joe violated the optimal relevance principle because the desired answer should be the description of the historical figure—President Benjamin Franklin. To find the humor in his response to the second question, the audience should know that the Second Amendment is the right to bear arms. And weapons are the means by which the convenience store is robbed. Roe vs Wade, according to the legal information from Cornell University Law School, stands for Jane Roe, a woman challenging the constitutionality of the Texas criminal abortion laws, which proscribe procuring or attempting an abortion except on medical advice for the purpose of saving the mother's life, and Wade, the judge in the case. In this case, the court finally ruled that the abortion was legal. However, Joe’s explanation is kind of pun because row and wade (the same pronunciation) are two ways to cross the borders into America. In summary, to understand Joe Wong’s talk show is to know American history and law. The cognitive environment will decide the way people understand humor.

For the variation of cognitive environment, people from different countries may find it hard to understand each other’s humor. In China, sometimes it is hard for people from different regions to share the same humor. Zhao Benshan is a well-known comedian all over China. On Spring Festival eve, there are usually about one billion Chinese TV audiences waiting for his sketch show. To understand his sense of humor one needs the cognition of Chinese culture and the Northern local traditions. The following lines are one of Zhao Benshan’s sketches uploaded by Ziye (2010, 11, 16):

Mao mao: My grandpa-in-law was named Bi-men-ting.
Lao bi: Your grandpa-in-law must have been a good player of Majiang.

老毕: 你老爷麻将打得不错吧，叫闭门听？

In this dialogue, the audience shared the laughter for the same pronunciation of Mao mao’s grandpa-in-law’s name and the term of playing Majiang. Bi-men-ting is a term to show that the player has won the game before the game starts. The cognition of this humor depends on the knowledge of Chinese Majiang. Another example in the same sketch is:

Mao mao: I mean that I was happy, because I found my grandpa-in-law. My grandpa-in-law will take me to the Liu Guang Da Dao Show, and I feel great. My grandpa-in-law can help me begin my career, so I want to thank you and also your ancestors. And my ancestors will thank you, too. I will never forget your kindness and your help even when I became a ghost.

毛毛：我的意思是心情从阴转晴了，因为我找到我姥爷了，姥爷能带我上溜光大道了，我心情太美好了。姥爷带我上道了，我衷心感谢我姥爷，我感谢你祖宗八辈，我代表祖宗八辈都感谢你，

你的大恩大德我一辈子不会忘记你，做鬼也不会放过你。

In this monologue, Mao mao desired to show her appreciation to Lao bi for his help and kindness, but it turned out to be a humor for her word choices. For one thing, the show is Xing Guang Da Dao (Star Avenue) but not the Liu Guang Da Dao (Smooth Avenue). For another, the sentence—I want to thank you, your ancestors. And my ancestors will thank him too. I will never forget your kindness and your help even when I became a ghost—is usually used to curse people in Chinese but not to thank people. (In Chinese taboo language, thank is changed into fuck in the
above sentences.) Therefore, the sense of irony and paradox in her monologue caused people to laugh.

**Comparison between English and Chinese verbal humor from the perspective of relevance theory**

Both English and Chinese verbal humor relate to the violation of the optimal relevance principle. In the process of communication, people from almost all over the world try to hunt for relevance. However, sometimes the inferential model can be different, which leads to the creation of humor. On many occasions, the ostensive messages offered by speakers may not be clear enough, which may cause listeners to interpret the sentences into different ways.

As for the cognitive environment, involving local culture, personal experiences, etc., is the biggest difference between Chinese and English verbal humor. In this case, the cognitive environment may affect the production and the interpretation of certain humor. Also, the cognitive environment affects people’s processing of humor. In a sense, humor shares some characteristics of regional culture and traditions.

Relevance theory still needs perfecting by scholars from relevant fields. However, the relevance theory can help humorists and learners have a better understanding of humor.
CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the review of existing literature related to the topic, the following conclusions are suggested.

Firstly, both Chinese and English verbal humor can be analyzed from the aspect of relevance theory. Also, the violation of the optimal relevance principle is one of the reasons for the laugh-producing mechanism. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), in the process of communication, hearers get adequate information and spontaneously predict what the speaker is most likely to utter later, but communication permits speakers from all cultures to utter what is different from or even incongruous with the hearers’ predictions. Both the Chinese and English verbal humor depends on context in that it can provide necessary ostensive messages for communication. Ostensive messages can sometimes be the key point for the laugh-producing mechanism, especially when the ostensive messages are not so evident for the listeners.

Secondly, cognitive environment can determine the inferring process of humor. Consequently, cognitive environment plays an important role in humor producing and humor comprehension. Cognitive environment is determined by various factors like culture, memory, experience, etc. So at times it is probably difficult for people from different regions to share the same humor. Individuals growing up in different cultural and cognitive environment tend to have their own ways of processing humor.

Lastly, from the aspect of communication, English verbal humor and Chinese verbal humor have a lot in common, so it may be less difficult for the both sides to understand each other’s humor. Both English speakers and Chinese speakers will follow the optimal relevance principle, so speakers from both languages tend to process and understand humor in the same way.
However, from the aspect of recognition, English verbal humor and Chinese verbal humor have a lot of differences. To understand each other’s humor in this case is not so easy; the audience should have a good knowledge of both English and Chinese. The knowledge involved is not only the knowledge of language itself, but the knowledge of local culture, tradition, events, memory, experiences, etc. In this case, to understand humor from another culture or language is the process of understanding communication and recognition in that culture or language.

Based on these conclusions and findings, it is recommended that further studies be done on the relationship between cognitive factors, ostensive messages, and the optimal relevance principle. Since communication and recognition are the key factors in understanding humor, more detailed information should be gathered about their relationships. Considering the importance of humor in teaching and learning culture, it is recommended that further studies be made on using humor in language teaching and acquisition. Humor itself can contribute to building a safe, relaxed and efficient atmosphere of learning, and humor is part of culture and language. Teaching humor is teaching language and culture. Consequently, it is necessary to study further the relationship between humor and language teaching.
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