

A Study of Verbal Humor in Public Speech from the Perspective of Relevance Theory and Cooperative Principle —Taking TED Talks as An Example

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Verbal humor carries rich cultural connotation and reflects the wisdom, communicative skills of the humor maker. There are many researches on verbal humor both at home and abroad, especially in the fields of sitcoms and literature from the perspective of pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. However, the researches on the humorous corpus of public speech are limited. This paper intendsto use qualitative research methods to explore the mechanism of verbal humor generation under the theoretical framework of cooperative principle and relevance theory. Through the analysis in the paper, it points out that verbal humor can be produced by violating the cooperative principle, the gap between maximum relevance and optimal relevance, and the speaker's expanding contextual reasoning. The cooperation principle and relevance theory have a good elaboration on humor in public speeches, but both have their own deficiencies in explanatory power. Only the combination of those two theories can better explain the generation mechanism of verbal humor.

Keywords: verbal humor, public speech, cooperative principle, relevance theory, TED

Introduction

Public speech has been considered as a primary communication method and highly praised for its tremendous influence on human civilization. TED, a non-profitable organization, has gained a lot of fans at home and abroad. Its popularity should be attributed to not only its brevity, incisiveness but also its exclusive humor.

Humor can provoke laughter and arouse amusement among people. Throughout the history, it has been attracting much attention of the researchers in different fields, such as linguistics, rhetoric, psychology and aesthetics. Since the 1970s and 1980s, along with the rapid development of linguistics, a lot of linguistic theories have been used to analyze and explain verbal humor, among which relevance theory and cooperative principle have been widely applied and have an explanatory power in the interpretation of the mechanism of the verbal communication in the field of sitcom.

Throughout the analysis in the working mechanism of the verbal humor generation in TED in the perspective of the two theories, it is hoped that we can test out the explanatory power of those two theories on the verbal humor in public speech and find out how verbal humor works. Besides, the study of the verbal humor in

TED from the perspective of both cooperative principle and relevance theory may, to a certain extent, broaden the scope of the study of humor, help us to appreciate the verbal humor much better, improve our communication competence and ability to make use of humor in speech.

2. Theoretic Framework

2.1 H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle

Grice believes that a tacit cooperation exists between the speaker and the hearer in people's verbal communication, and there are some principles that both parties are supposed to abide by. In other words, in order to communicate accurately and effectively, both the speaker and the hearer should adopt a cooperative attitude and follow a set of regularities intentionally or unintentionally. The cooperative principle later became the core of pragmatics. To specify the CP further, Grice introduced four categories of maxims. The first one is the maxim of quantity: make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange); do not make your contribution more informative than is required. The second one is the maxim of quality: try to make your contribution one that is true; do not say what you believe to be false; do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. The third one is the maxim of relation: be relevant. Last one is the maxim of manner: avoid obscurity of expression; avoid ambiguity; be brief; be orderly (Dai, 2013).

2.2 Relevance Theory

According to relevance theory, a successful interpretation of communicative intention can be achieved only by the selection of the appropriate set of contextual assumptions which is determined by the search of relevance.

Sperber & Wilson define relevance as "an assumption is relevant in a context if, and only if, it has some contextual effect in that context" (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 122). The generation of contextual effects is related to the relationship between new information and existing contextual assumptions or old information. To be more specific, there are three kinds of contextual effects:

- i. The combination of new information and existing contextual assumptions produces new contextual meanings.
- ii. New information reinforces existing contextual assumptions;
- iii. New information contradicts and excludes the existing contextual assumptions.

The greater the contextual effect is, the greater the degree of relevance. Another factor that relates to relevance is the efforts called for to process ostension stimulus. Other things being equal, the greater the contextual effect, the stronger the relevance; the smaller the efforts to deal with the ostension behavior, the stronger the relevance. The degree of relevance depends on the contextual effect and the efforts involved in the processing of the utterance.

Generally speaking, the speaker does not always exert plenty of efforts required for better contextual effects. According to this phenomenon, Sperber & Wilson put forward two principle of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, p. 158):

(1) The first (or cognitive) principle of relevance:

Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance;

(2) The second (or communicative) principle of relevance:

Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance;

Among them, the first principle is related to cognition, the second principle is related to communication. That is to say, maximization of relevance is cognition-oriented and demands least efforts for the hearer to analyze the speaker's ostensive utterance, while optimal relevance refers to that sufficient and effective efforts has been made to gain the correct interpretation of communicative intention and the greatest contextual effect. In general, every speaker is supposed to make his utterance communicates its own optimal relevance and intends to utter information which provide sufficient ostensive stimulus to hearer. However, only if the speaker and the hearer share the same contextual environment, can maximal relevance be equivalent to optimal relevance. And the larger mutual cognitive environment is, the greater the degree of mutual manifestation is, the more successful a communication will be.

In communication, people always follow the relevant principles, exert efforts to find the optimal relevance between the ostensive utterance and the context, then possess the implication intended to convey, and finally achieve the contextual effect. At a word, the process of understanding the utterance is a process of seeking the relevant context and attaining the optimal relevance.

3. Analysis of Generation of Verbal Humor from CP and RT

3.1 Application of CP in Analyzing Verbal Humor in TED

3.1.1 Violation of the quality maxim to generate verbal humor

Example (1)

Good morning. How are you? It's been great, hasn't it? I've been blown away by the whole thing. In fact, I'm leaving.

(Sir Ken Robinson: Do Schools Kill Creativity?)

In the example, those sentences were the opening remark of the speaker. Instead of going straight to the point of the speech, the speaker firstly expressed his feeling of standing on the stage. He said he had been blown away and was leaving. Obviously, in people's common sense, it was impossible to be blown away to leave at that situation. The hearer absolutely realized that there was a violation of the quality maxim of cooperative principle and then tried to find out the communicative intention that the speaker was so honored and peasant to stand here sharing his experience in front of the audience. Such a violation of maxim added a sense of humor to the speech.

3.1.2 Violation of the relation maxim to generate humor

Example (2)

That was it, by the way. Thank you very much. So, 15 minutes left. (laughter) Well, I was born... no. I heard a great story recently...

(Sir Ken Robinson: Do Schools Kill Creativity?)

In this example, after winning a lot of applause, the speaker said closing words to wrap up his speech. Apparently, the speaker was just joking. Then, he reverted to the speech and subconsciously blurted out "well, I was born..." which obviously had no relation with the theme of the speech. What the speaker said violated the relation maxim. And it was such a seemingly subconscious slip of the tongue that elicited plenty of laughter.

3.2 Application of RT in Analyzing Verbal Humor in TED

3.2.1 Generation of humor from the contrast between maximal relevance and optimal relevance

In a communication, the hearer may infer and find out the assumptions of maximum relevance for each sentence uttered by the speaker. At the same time, the hearer's cognitive context will reconstruct accordingly as a result of continuous selection of discourse comprehension. Sometimes the hearer building up a most relevance expectation or predictions in his mind according to the cognitive context he forms. However, as the speech proceeds, the speaker give new information which is completely inconsistent with his former speech content or the most relevance expectation. Faced by the incongruity or some form of discrepancy between his expectations and the punch line, the hearer has found a solution to the problem, and does so in a process of reinterpretation which accommodates the new information. The hearer realizes that he has been led up to the garden path by the speaker and according to psychological theories of humor, it is a mixture of surprise, appreciation of incongruity and satisfaction at having solved the problem that accounts for the pleasurable effects which give rise to laughter.

Example (3)

I believe we should have robot girlfriends. I just believe that they (robot girlfriends) should come with a feminist protocol and artificial intelligence. So, she can take one look at that guy and go, "I am too good for you. I am leaving"

(Chuck Nice: A funny look at the unintended consequences of technology)

In this speech, the speaker was talking about whether or not to have robot girlfriends. As was known to the audience, the theme of the speech was about the unintended consequences of technology. Therefore, it was reasonable for the audience to infer that the speaker to some extent did not agree with the application of technology in our daily life and would not propose the adaptation of robot girlfriends. When the such words—"I believe we should have robot girlfriends" came into their minds, they may feel perplexed and their expectation of maximum relevance had not been met. However, after the emergence of speaker's next sentences "So, she can take one look at that guy and go", "I am too good for you. I am leaving", which meant that AI will become more intelligent, have their own emotions and eventually threaten human beings, the audience came to understand the speaker's communicative intention and gained the optimal relevance that AI would ultimately do damage to our lives. It is such a reversion that achieves humor.

3.2.2 Generation of humor from more inferential efforts

In verbal humor, sometimes, the speaker expresses his intention mildly and indirectly. Sometimes seemingly unrelated words, in fact, bear potential correlation, but the degree of correlation is just tenuous. According to the communicative principle of relevance: every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance, the hearer has to expand his cognitive environment, trying to search for the relevance between the utterance and the cognitive context to abstain the connotative meaning. During this process the hearer inputs extra processing efforts to gain the communicative intention intended by the speaker, the humorous effect generate as a reward of the extra efforts. Here are some examples.

Example (4)

"woo, I would not want to be your therapist." I was like "what does that mean?" and they're like "I'm just saying, you know. Don't bring your measuring stick."

(Brené Brown: The Power of Vulnerability)

In this example, the speaker who was a social worker had experienced a spiritual breakdown. So, she turned to her friends who were also therapists for help. However, her friends all gave negative answers and added that “don’t bring your measuring stick”. Hearing her friends negative reply, the audience might feel a little puzzled and could find any clues at the first thinking. However, according to the principle of relevance: every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of relevance, the audience expended more efforts and search his or her encyclopedia knowledge and context, realizing that the speaker was a social worker engaged in vulnerability researches. That is to say, there was a possibility that the speaker just would take his friends as the research object. Therefore, by searching relevant knowledge, the audience derived the communicative intention and gained the humorous effect. Because a mutually cognitive environment was created among the speaker and the audience, the audience could make appropriate inferences and appreciate the speaker’s great sense of humor.

Conclusion

Through the study of verbal humor in public speech from the perspective of relevance theory and cooperative principle, it is obvious to find that the cooperative principle and relevance theory both can give a good explanation to the humor in public speech. However, in the humor caused by the inference of cognitive context or expectation failure, the principle of cooperation cannot give a reasonable explanation, and relevance theory can make up for this shortcoming. Because there is a mistake in a certain link in the process of context hypothesis, speculation and reasoning, it is the mistake of psychological cognitive model, rather than the mistake caused by intentional violation of cooperation principle. Of course, relevance theory is not omnipotent, and could not make a reasonable explanation for all humorous communication. Because relevance theory emphasizes the relevance of the two sides’ utterances in verbal communication, it cannot explain the humor caused by the repetition of utterances or the uncorrelation of communicative utterances. At this point, the principle of cooperation gives a better explanation. Through the comparison, it could be found that both the cooperative principle and the relevance theory are a kind of guidance for the interpretation of verbal humor in public speech. The best way to understand humorous utterance is to complement the two theories.

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