

The humor in 'friends'



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"Friends" is the famous sitcom in the United States which was played at the NBC television since the 1990s. After entering the Chinese film market, The TV sitcom also have given China's TV viewers a new feeling, and attracted many fans of it. As one of the most popular sitcoms in the United States, "Friends" has been successfully completed 10 seasons. And more than 60 countries have its loyal audience. But, when the film was playing, I found that most of the people seemed by no means to had laughed as might as perhaps had been anticipated in canned laughter. To explore the reason is people are unable to understand the humor of it. So they don't laugh. Therefore, this essay attempts to explore humor of Friends through the use of relevant theory and research.

Definition and Classification of Humor

Humor derived from the Latin whose original meaning is "body fluid". And the extensive use of humorous is attribute to the British playwright whose name is Ben Jonson. The "Every Man in His Humor" which is created by him is remarkable for humor. Humor is a form of languages which through the art of processing and it is artistic language.

Definition of Humor

French writer named Degebola had given a definition of humor:

"Humor is an element in people's laugh."

"Humor is what moves us."

"Humor is a smile in the eyes of wise man."

"This is a happy idea of an unsophisticated person."

In fact, it is very hard to give a definition of humor for it belongs to a genius and inspiration. Humor will use the glows of wisdom to rout of the dark of life, and create the beaming smile. Lenin had said that: " Humor is a beautiful, healthy quality." Maybe this is why some people have sense of humor as a manifestation of a person's maturity. So humor is the great wisdom, which is the ridicule and naughty after apperceive life. And this will be my definition of humor.

Common Classification of Humor

From the form of points, humor mainly including these types as followed:

" Transform Humor" means to agree with this point firstly, and then worsened, and point out the different point of view. This humor can make both sides of this antagonism freed from the confrontation, and create a relaxed atmosphere. Let's take an example: Huxley actively supported and promoted Darwin's theory of evolution, for which he had been cursed as " Darwin's bulldog" by the church at that time. A debate, when Huxley went into the meeting, the religious leaders and some people who against the theory of evolution were shouting: " Be careful, Darwin's bulldog comes again!" Huxley wasn't angry, and then he said to the detractors contemptuously: " Yes, you are right. But the hounds are the most fearsome things of thieves!" As a result, the attackers got much unhappiness, but Huxley and his supporters kept calm and happy. The character of " Transform Humor" is the objection after agreement, and it clarify their own point of view unexpectedly with the purpose to enable readers to understand that's witty sense of humor.

“ Self-mockery Humor” means that others tease you intentionally or unintentionally to send you into a dilemma, and then you can use the “ Self-mockery Humor” to disengage yourself from adversity decently. Rockefeller who was the U. S. oil magnate was a little bald. Once at a public occasion, one of his opponents in a sarcastic tone said to him: “ Sir, you have made combing into an art form, because you have made an arrangement for every hair of your head!” With a wry smile, Rockefeller said: “ In the past years, they are just a number. But now they both have their own names.”

Everybody got into laugh, and Rockefeller was also able to escape the predicament quickly. A real sense of humor is inseparable from self-involvement, which gives the humor to others, but also to themselves.

People who lack of self-confidence can not humor himself. Therefore, the “ Self-mockery Humor” is more need for self-confidence.

“ Distortion Humor” means the listener don't understand the meaning of each other, but apprehend from another aspect intentionally. And bring a sense of humor to make people laugh. Let's take an example to explain.

Teacher: I hope all of students' parents will come to attend on the parent-teacher meeting this Friday.

Student: Excuse me, sir. Which should we call to take part in, farther or mother?

Teacher: It's not important. Ask the person who is the head of a household to come.

Student: That had to be me.

The object that the teacher pointeded was parents. But the student interpreted it as member of family. So, of course, he included himself. “ Distortion Humor” is often expressed in the form of pun, similar sound and ambiguity.

“ Sophistry Humor”. Hegel once discussed sophistry like this: Sophistry usually means to make a false truth very nice, which like the real thing. “ Sophistry Humor” means to make humor in a sophistic way. Of course, it should make sophistry emotional and extreme. Because it is the only way to make sophistry integrates with humor. Emotionality means to inject joking and ridicule factors into Sophistry. Extreme can make a person know it is false immediately, which avoid deceptive and damaging. “ Sophistry Humor” is not the same as “ Sophistry Logic”. “ Sophistry Humor” let you see the flaws deliberately, and realize the humor in it. For example:

The teacher discovered that Peter was sleeping in the class. Then she asked:
Why do you sleep at class, Peter?

Peter: “ I’m not sleeping.”

Teacher: “ Why do you close your eyes?”

Peter: “ Teacher, I was reciting the concept.”

Teacher: “ Why do you nod you head all the time?”

Peter: “ Because your class is very nice, sir.”

Teacher: “ Why do you drool?”

Peter: “ Because it is full of relish in your class.”

Peter was sleeping in the class, but he refused to acknowledge. The words that he answered the teacher were all false, which like Hegel said: “ It is very nice, and like the real thing”.

The Humor Used in Friends

“ Universal Humor” means the way of humor which make different cognitive environment of readers understand easily. For example:

Phoebe: Yeah. We don't speak. She's like this high-powered driven career type. Chandler: What does she do? Phoebe: She's a waitress. (Season 1: 2)

In this dialog the waitress does not like her twin sister clearly. First, the description of her sister makes the audience think of a high occupation immediately. But as the dialogue progresses, the audience know she is a waitress. Two kinds of script opposition (high / low status) make them have to understand the text again, and this processing has also got more contextual effects.

“ Cultural Humor”. Such humorous use the elements of knowledge which should be understood under a particular cultural context. In sitcom, it is often to use some movie stars or the name of a classic novel to get humorous effects. Therefore, the focus of such a translation is that we must notice whether the audience can understand the original knowledge and do some necessary adjustments before translation. Or it must result in failure. For example:

Monica: Oh wait you know what I got it I got it pretend like you just woke up okay that will throw her off. Be sleepy. Rachel:

Yes and grumpy. Chandler: What are you stop naming dwarves!

Season 3: 4%

“ Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” is well-known story in the West. “ Sleepy” and “ Grumpy” are two of the small dwarfs’ names. Chandler’s reply gives an additional contextual effect to the recipients. But in China, the more familiar calling is “ the first dwarf, the second dwarf, and the third” And the Chinese audiences are unable to obtain the names of the dwarfs. The translation make interpreter pay more efforts, but received little of the contextual effects. So it is failure.

“ Verbal Humor”. Language humor (or named pun) is a word game to strive to achieve a humorous effect. When the two scripts appear in a scene simultaneously, they may be overlap or completely overlap, but the meaning must be opposed in certain degree. In translation, due to the coincidence of language, puns can also be reflected perfectly in the translated version by the way of literal translation. For example:

1)Joey: AH now Rachel these ah these little women. Rachel: Yeah.
Joey: How little are they? I mean are they like scary little? (Season 3: 13)

Joy is going to read “ Little women” which is recommended by Rachel. But he still comprehends in wrong way for his little reading.

2)Phoebe: Well I-I wasn’t hopping mad you know. Frank: You hopped a little bit. (Season 3: 5)

“ Hop” means “ light jumping”. But the meaning of the text is “ very angry.”

This translation is very successful. However, such a language is rare and more of the status as flowed:

3) Phoebe: Oh. (They start kissing again) Ross : Wait¼Ewait¼Ewait.

Phoebe: What? Ross: My foot is stuck in the pocket. Phoebe: What? Ross:

No¼EI can't get it out. Phoebe: Well¼Ethat's not something a girl wants to hear. Ross: No¼Ecome on don't start. (They start kissing again) Ouch!

Phoebe: What? Ross: Stupid balls are in the way. (Holds up two balls)(Season 3: 6)

In this event, the translators can adjust at all levels to make the translation as similar as original interpretation.

Humor Translation Theories

Through the comparison of humor used in common environment and “ Friends”, we know that humor can roughly be divided into the following two kinds of humor theory.

General Theory of Verbal Humor

The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) proposed by Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo in 1991 (an extension of the semantic script theory of humour, SSTH which Raskin proposed in 1985) identifies a semantic model capable of expressing incongruities between semantic scripts in verbal humor; this has been seen as an important recent development in the theory of laughter. The GTVH is one of the most mature theories which research the humor of language from linguistic humor. GYVH proposed the humor

mechanism which is made up by script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy and language.

Opposition can be interpreted as “ overlapping” and “ opposition” of two or more of the script.

Logical mechanism would mean that only works in a joke. Distorted and joking logic means the logical mechanism of combine two or more scripts.

Situation is the various “ props” of joke: people, events and things.

Target means the laughing-stock in humor.

Narrative strategy indicates that any sense of humor will adopt some sort of narrative techniques, such as general narration, dialogue, puzzles and so on.

Language contains all the needed information and specific wording the text of the oral language of the text.

Attardo think that the most important element of knowledge is that the inconsistent script which has determined the specific choices of other elements. So he point out that any humorous text must contain this factor. He also pointed out that “ when two humorous compare, the levels higher, the same less.” (Attardo, 1994: 183) So it is also a tool to compare the similarity of humorous.

Relevant Theory of Humor Translation

Relevance theory is used mainly to understand the problem and describe discourse. In the view of its founders— Sperber and Wilson, the context in discourse comprehension is a very important factor. They suggest that it is

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necessary to understand the words in context. And it's only need to activate in certain aspects of the context, but not all. The building of context doesn't progress in the bound of " mutual knowledge" for understanding the discourse, but try their best to build their own context to become " communion." When people affiliating with each other, they continue to correspond and compromise, and be in accord at last. Relevance theory suggests that here are generally three situations about complementarity and expansion for interlocutors to cognize context:

The first is encyclopedic knowledge in context, which the listeners add some necessary encyclopedic knowledge to expand their understanding context in their existing cognitive context.

The second is context of knowledge. It means that the listeners can transfer related information from the short-term memory which provided by above text to expand their understanding of the context.

The last is situational knowledge in context. It means that the listener must call the relevant information from the surrounding scene to expand their understanding of the context.

When translating the " universal humor", it's important for readers to gain more contextual effects through the process of seeking the opposite script to pay extra effort.

When translating the " cultural humor", the translator should pay attention to that if the readers' knowledge can understand the elements in the text.

When translating the “ verbal humor”, the translator can do some flexible adjustments within the allowable range.

Analysis of Humor in Friends’ dialogues

Through the above descriptions and argumentations between common humor and the humor in “ Friends”, the following we will make a detailed analysis of the humorous dialogues in “ Friends”.

There are a large number of humorous dialogues in “ Friends”. But not all these dialogues can be used in this paper. So, the humorous dialogue needs to be created in accordance with factors or the reasons for creating humor. Those that flout three maxims were chosen to be explained in details.

Humor Produced by the Deliberate Flout of the Maxim of Quality

By the maxim of quality, it means that in a dialogue we all make our contribution to one thing that is true or say things that are true. To keep to this maxim, we simultaneously observe two sub-maxims: we do not say what we believe to be false, and we do not say anything we lack adequate evidence.

Joey: What are you talking about? Keep it!

Phoebe: It’s not mine, I didn’t earn it. If I kept it, it would be like stealing.

Rachel: Yeah, but if you spent it, it would be like shopping!

Phoebe: Okay. Okay, let’s say I bought a really great pair of shoes. Do you know what I’d hear, with every step I took? “ Not-mine. Not-mine. Not-mine.”

And even if I was happy, okay, and, and skipping-“ Not-not-mine, not-not-mine, not-not-mine, not-not-mine”.....(Friends, 1994)

This dialogue appears in this scene that Phoebe find there is 500 extra dollars appeared in her account. And every one advises her to keep the money, but she is unwilling. She wants to use them to buy something. She believes that if she used the money to buy shoes, shoes would blame her. Of course, she knows shoes can say nothing. She is saying something untrue and is thus flouting the maxim of Quality. At the same time, humor is produced by the shoes which are personified as a person having a voice. Her implied message is “ I should not keep the extra money. And I would feel guilty if I kept and used it.”

2)” Ross: Yeah, uh... and then I figured after you win, we could all go out to the balcony and see a night rainbow with gremlins dancing on top of it!”

“ Ross: You know what, I’m sure your wish is gonna come true, but, you guys-just in case, maybe a genie will come out if we rub this lamp!” (Friends, 1999)

Ross said that these two sentences, meaning that compare with his friends’ words “ someone see a night rainbow with gremlins dancing on top of It”, the words “ a genie will come out if we rub this lamp” is more convinced, to show he does not believe his friends would win. The humor here is expressed through the use of metaphor. Ross knows that it is hardly happen for the phenomenon what he said, so he is flouting the maxim of quality deliberately. The implicature that results is “ It is impossible for you to win.”

3) “ Ross: If I hadn’t let you talk me to go into the airport in the first place, I wouldn’t have put my fist through the wall.

Chandler: You put your fist through the wall?

Ross: No. I miss it and hit the door. But it opened really hard.” (Friends, 1997)

Ross fails to persuade his girlfriend to stay with him. He says he put his fist through the wall to show how upset and angry he is. But, what Ross said is doubted by Chandler because Chandler knows Ross is too timid to put his fist through the wall. Last, Ross admits he just put his fist on the door. Here, the untrue words which said by Ross on purpose and so it flout the maxim of quality. This kind of humor is founded on hyperbole largely.

Humor Produced by the Deliberate Flout of the Maxim of Relevance

The maxim of relevance means that we make all of contribution relevant to the exchange in a dialogue.

1¼%” Ross: So, I just finished this fascinating book. By the year 2030, there’ll be computers that can carry out the same amount of functions as an actual human brain. So theoretically you could download tour thoughts and memories into this computer and – and – and live forever as a machine.

Chandler: And I just realized I could sleep with my eyes open.” (Friends, 1995)

Although Ross and Chandler are good friends, they are worried about different things due to their differences in character. When Ross is talking about high-tech, Chandler talks about sleeping with eye open in response. His reaction has nothing to do with the subject of Ross. Therefore, he is flouting the maxim of Relation. It is easy for audience to understand his sense of humor. That the subtext is: " I'm not interested in your topic".

2¼‰" Ross: I can ask her to live with me.

Chandler: Are you serious?

Ross: Why not?

Chandler: Because you've only known her for six weeks. I've got a carton of milk in my fridge, and I've had a longer relationship with.

Ross: Look, guys, I love her, you know?" (Friends, 2001)

Chandler: And I love the milk! But I won't ask some British girl to move in with me!

Ross wants to ask his British Girlfriend to live with him. But Chandler disagrees. He thinks it is too short for them to live together. And this is reasonable. Later, he refers to the milk which is in his fridge. Chandler compares the time that he keeps the milk in fridge with the time that Ross knows his girlfriend. It is clear that there are no comparable kinds. Obviously, the thing said by Chandler is irrelevant to the matter of Ross. Thus humor is produced by his flouting the maxim of Relevance.

Phoebe: Oh, hey, Mon, do you still have your like old blouses and dresses from high school?

Monica: Yeah, I think I have some around here somewhere. Why?

Phoebe: Well, it's just that maternity clothes are so expensive." (Friends, 2003)

In this conversation, when Phoebe is asked why she talks about Monica's dresses from high school, she answers maternity clothes are expensive which does not seem to answer the question. But in fact, she is suggesting that the blouses and dresses of Monica are big enough for a pregnant woman. Thus humor is produced by her flouting the maxim of Relevance deliberately.

Humor Produced by the Deliberate Flout of the Maxim of Manner

By the maxim of manner, it is meant that in a dialogue we all try to be perspicuous. In line with this maxim, there are four sub-maxims: 1) we try to avoid obscurity, 2) we try to avoid ambiguity, 3) we try to be brief, and 4) we try to be orderly.

Phoebe: Ooh! Oh! (She starts to pluck at the air just in front of Ross.)

Ross: No, no don't! Stop cleansing my aura! No, just leave my aura alone, okay?

Phoebe: Fine! Be murky!" (Friends, 1996)

In this conversation, Phoebe tries to catch Ross's attention by the way of plucking the air in front of Ross. But Ross feels annoying, and he would like leaving alone. So he said: " Stop cleansing my aura! Just leave my aura alone". Moreover, Phoebe doesn't use " unhappy" to describe the air around Ross directly. She uses " murky". Here, both Ross and Phoebe use obscure expression and thus flout the maxim of Manner. But the humorous effect they create and the implicature of their utterance are obvious and accepted by audience.

Emily: What did you decide? Does your uncle Nathan get an invitation or not?

Ross: Oh, God! Nobody likes him. And he's so cheap. I mean he'd never fly to London in a million years... Yeah, invite him." (Friends, 1997)

Ross and Emily are deciding attendees for their wedding. When Emily and Ross discuss whether tell Ross' uncle to attend the wedding, Ross does not answer " yes" or " no" briefly and directly. Instead, he says a lot of weak points of his uncle in the first place, but finally he decides to invite him so quickly. Therefore, it is clear that Ross intentionally express in a long way which create a sense of humor in the way of flouting the maxim of Manner.

Chandler: Now it seems like all of a sudden, so much is happening.

Joey: I know. Ross is getting married.

Chandler: Phoebe's making people.

Joey: Everybody's doing stuff.

Chandler: And we just sit here. I meant if I died, the only people know would be that I was here only by the ass print on the chair!" (Friends, 1997)

Chandler and Joey have a conversation talking about their recent life. Compared with the friends who are in dealing with some major events, they are wasting their lives. Chandler says these words to create a funny effect, and that is " we just sit here...if I died, the only people know would be t hat I was here only by the ass print on the chair".

This sentence could hardly be humorous if he just says directly and briefly " we just sit here without doing things meaningful". Therefore, Chandler produces humor by the way of flouting the maxim of Manner.

Conclusion

This paper discusses some humorous conversations in the U. S. sitcom Friends. Humorous conversation delivers the meaning of a conversation situation in this case. Therefore, this paper, furthermore, is possible to explore the deeper meanings which are implied or hidden in humor. To some extents, this paper can help audiences better understand the method for humor, as well as the expression of humor, in particular, to improve their ability of understanding and using humor of American verbal because the humor in Friends is humor of unique American style.

However, the researches in this field have not reached a mature stage, which are quite deficiency and lack of authority both in China and abroad. Because of the differences between different cultures, people in non-English speaking countries do not fully understand the English sense of humor sometimes. " Friends" is a classical and typical American sitcom which is full

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of strong elements of American culture. The way of Studying and discussing American culture is a great help for English learners to understand American humor. Therefore, a further study of humor in “ Friends” can possibly make certain contributions for cross-cultural communication.

Humorous language, as the main form to express humor, is popular in our daily life. It comes from our daily life while to some degree it goes beyond life reality. Humor is such a pervasive human phenomenon, observable in many aspects of life that it has been studied from a multi-disciplinary viewpoint, including fields like linguistics, rhetoric, aesthetics, philosophy, sociology, and etc. From this essay, detailed and Pragmatic Analysis of Verbal Humor in “ Friends” can help English learners to better improve their ability of understanding and the appreciation of the nature of American humor. At the same time, it is illuminating for them to apply humor skill to mediate interpersonal relationships.

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