

# A Study on Punch Lines in TV Comedies of High and Low Context Culture

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*My qtfu<high-context, low-context, intercultural communication, verbal language, TV comedy, punch lines*

**Abstract:** In the last two decades, there have been quite a many of successful cases of American TV comedies which have made great hits in China. Apart from the development of internet technology and its popularity as well as convenience among common people, verbal language in TV comedies contributes significantly for the success of intercultural communication. Therefore, this paper is committed to analyzing the differences between punch lines in two different cultures, namely, high-context culture and low-context culture. In the cast light of Hall's context theory, and from the aspect of verbal language in intercultural communication, a Chinese TV comedy "I Love My Family" and an American TV comedy "the Marvelous Maisel" are choose as examples for comparison.

## 1. Introduction

Language is the most important tool for human communication. It distinguishes us from other animals and is a unique means of human communication. What's more, language is the carrier of a culture. It reflects not only the environment in which people live, but also the values that people hold. It is apparent that language and culture exert an influence on each other. As language learners and relevant language workers, they should not only grasp relevant knowledge of the target language such as pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, idioms and so on, but also understand the habits, customs, behaviors and values of the culture of the target language. Especially in intercultural communication activities, in order to make the communication between the two sides smooth and successful, a clear understanding of each other's culture can not only make us fully adapt to the target culture subjectively, but also enhance the effectiveness of information dissemination in intercultural communication. [1]

As a means of cultural transmission, TV comedy is a channel of demonstrating the culture of the countries and regions where the products are exported. Especially in the past two decades, with the continuous development of Internet technology, TV comedies have been widely disseminated on the Internet. The success of this cross-cultural form of communication is evident in the popularity of many American dramas in China and the emergence of various hot drama fan groups. As an American drama produced under the low context culture, its brilliant achievements in Chinese culture which is characterized with context culture can not be separated from the cultural penetration of the language in its comedy script.

The study is dedicated to answering the following research questions:

(a) Were there any cultural gaps in people's understanding between western and Chinese TV comedies? A Chinese TV comedy "I Love My Family" and an American TV comedy "the Marvelous Maisel" are choose as examples for comparison in the study.

(b) To what extent, for people from high context culture (China) could appreciate the sense of humor in TV comedies of low context culture (America)?

## 2. Differences Between High-context Culture and Low-context Culture

High-context culture and low-context culture are two concepts put forward by E.T. Hall in 1976. In high context culture, speakers tend to hide the effective information of communication beyond the language, such as environment, identity, rank and other factors. Therefore, in intercultural communication, Chinese and Japanese who are from high-context cultures often give people from low-context culture an impression of implicit and modest, which also makes people from low-context cultures feel unable to find the focus of the conversation. On the contrary, people's communication in low-context culture largely depends on the language itself. For example, people in the United States, Germany and other countries are more direct in the process of intercultural communication. Most of the effective information they communicate comes from the literal meaning of speech, which has little to do with other factors beyond the language. [2]

Understanding verbal and non-verbal information accurately is the key to intercultural communication. In intercultural communication between high and low contexts, whether the information conveyed by the speaker can be understood completely by the recipient is often a challenge for every intercultural communication worker. In high context culture, people's speech is implicit and it contains a lot of other information, and they often do not show their true feelings directly. However, the sender expects the other party to understand their intentions. During communication they will not emphasize themselves and any words or actions that highlight themselves will be regarded as impolite and inappropriate. The way of thinking, which is characterized with a spiral type, and does not directly express its intention. In contrast, people in low-context culture speak directly and think in a linear way. Meanwhile in conversation, they highlight themselves and tend to be more confident. [3]

## 3. Punch Lines in TV Comedies of High and Low Context Culture

The influence of culture on speech is multifaceted, including phonetics, vocabulary, syntax, discourse and pragmatics, especially vocabulary, discourse and pragmatics. Many linguists and scholars have done a lot of research, which can help us better understand the real intention of the speaker in cross-cultural communication. Whether in China or in the United States, TV comedy as a form of entertainment for the public, content is relaxed and humorous, the play contains a lot of jokes, that is, punch line. The punch lines of Chinese and American comedies are influenced by Chinese and American culture, and the forms of punch lines which make audiences laugh are quite different.

*(The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel Season 2 Episode 3)*

*Mrs. Maisel: I want to talk about something serious. Nuclear war, nightmare, fear. I don't mean those who are dead, I'm talking about hiding in a bunker until the mass of the radioactive material dissolved. Have you met my family, Mr. Khrushchev? If you're gonna beat us up, let's get rid of us.*

Comedian Mrs. Maisel told the audience this joke on stage. She exaggerated her family's life as an underground air raid shelter filled with radioactive materials and asked Mr. Khrushchev to destroy them. In her talk, she mentioned Khrushchev, the leader of that time ruling former Soviet Union, who planned the Cuban missile crisis that once put the Soviet Union and the United States on the verge of nuclear war. For people who are from high context culture (China), they can sense the exaggeration she made, which is the punch line Ms. Maisel made. This version of the joke is only the initial version of Mrs. Maisel when she just came on stage. Later, she upgraded the paragraph as follows:

*(The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel Season 2 Episode 3)*

*Mrs. Maisel: I read the government brochure that I read we shouldn't put anything that's annoying to the radioactive object shelter. Do you realize what that means? There are hundreds of radioactive Jewish mothers on the ground walking down the upper west side street. If that's not the deterrent power of nuclear war I don't know what that means.*

In the upgraded version, Mrs. Maisel described her mother as a Jewish mother for the strict

discipline in her family. The government's brochure which strictly forbid to bring annoying things into radioactive bomb shelters, which means that thousands of Jewish mothers with radioactive elements are roaming the streets of Upper West Side, and there is no greater deterrent to nuclear war than that. As a comedian, Mrs. Maisel directly used words to compare his fear of mother's discipline with the fear caused by radioactive elements brought about by nuclear war. The updated version of this joke is more colorful than the original version.

To a large extent, American humor depends on vocabulary and speech itself, and there is no need to discuss other factors of this joke. If it is not spoken directly enough, Americans in a low-context culture can not appreciate the sense of humor. On the contrary, Chinese people in high context culture will not find such jokes particularly funny, because in Chinese, the way of expression of humor is often beyond words. For example, there are two examples in the following two scenarios in the Chinese TV comedy *I Love My Family*.

*(Episode 2 of I Love My Family, Zhixin is having a talk with his father Fu Senior )*

*Fu Senior: Zhixin, shall we talk again tomorrow?*

*Zhixin: After you listen to my story, Xiaofan and Yuanyuan's stories are nothing!*

*Fu Senior: Ah? More serious than theirs?*

*Zhixin: Let's talk straight. Just forget you have a son like me, you can take me to the Police's.*

*Fu Senior: wass it an economic problem? I've already seen it.*

*Zhixin: You can send me to the Public Security Bureau when you get me out of the Police's. Is the hooliganism under the control of that bureau?*

*Fu Senior: So are you one of them?*

*Zhixin: When you take me out of the Public Security Bureau, you can send me to the Ministry of Security?*

*Fu Senior: Did you really sell intelligence?*

*Zhixin: When you take me out of the Security Department, you .....*

*Fu Senior: Can't you still get out? Get out, get out of here!*

In the first scenario, if the reader does not understand the scene and plot at that time, the punch lines can not be realized from the perspective of language alone. In order to make his family aware of their mistakes, Fu Senior launched self-criticism activities. Zhixin, his little son, thought that his father just made fuss about nothing, so he deliberately threw dirt to himself. People who know about the plot have the idea that Zhixin, an ordinary youth and a little potato, is out of employment, and there is no chance for him getting access to the information of the country. The punch lines are about the distinctive contrast which is displayed by an ordinary person relates to some powerful national institutions.

*(Episode 8 of I Love My Family: Liu and Zhang fell in love with each other)*

*Liu: Honey, sister, what's your family name?*

*Zhang: My surname is Zhang. My name is Zhang Fenggu.*

*Liu: Feng Gu....*

*Zhang: I Buy fried dough sticks from your stand every day. I haven't asked what your name is.*

*Liu: My surname is Liu. My name is Liu Jianmin.*

*Feng Gu, Gu, my dear Gu!*

*Zhang: I won't hide feelings in my heart.*

*Liu: I want to grab your hand and take you away.*

*Zhang: Wait! Who knows whether you still love me tomorrow or not?*

*Liu: Why don't even believe me? I'm ready to change my life with this the trip with you.*

In this scenario, Liu, who's the helper in this family, fell in love with the seller of fried sticks, Zhang. The punch lines are achieved for the following reasons. One reason is that they both speak dialects with strong local characteristics, one is from Sichuan, and the other is from Henan. The distinctive accent is amusing. What's more, their way of addressing each other is funny, especially the way Zhang addressing Liu. In China, lovers who have the first date hardly call the other "honey"

which is common in low context culture. And in Chinese, the word “Gu” has the same pronunciation, which means quite different, it means “*aunt*”. The addressing indicates a absurd relationship, which makes audience a great laugh. Finally, it is when Liu and Zhang quote lyrics of some popular songs to express their love to each other. Both Liu and Zhang have little education, they live in the bottom of the society and do labor work to make a living. They are nearly ill-literate while they read aloud the lines like reading a poem. Thus, the contrast caused between their identity and their behavior is hilarious.

#### 4. Conclusion

The influence of culture on language is multifaceted. The language of TV comedies also reflects the culture of the exporting country. In the context of high and low context culture, TV comedy as a form of intercultural communication, in which the forms of punch lines are quite different, the purpose is to entertain the audience. Punch lines in American comedy in low context culture largely depend on vocabulary and syntax, that is, speech itself. However, punch lines of Chinese comedy in high context culture need to be understood from many aspects such as environment, identity, status, relationship and so on.

#### References

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