

## The Rhetoric Art of Register Variation in Comedy<sup>1</sup> ——Taking Comedy Lines as an Example

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**Abstract:** Register variation is composed by three elements, the language field, tenor and mode of discourse, which is in a close relation with the context in the language. No matter how the language context changes, it will bring the change of the semantic meaning, while the semantic change can cause different registers. Register variation is a non-routine deviation in a concrete language context. In this non-routine deviation, the language field, tenor and mode are three different variables in the discourse. Due to the close relation between language context and register, the various contexts can cause different kinds of register variation. Register variation is the language deviation phenomenon on different language fields, tenors and modes, as well as a kind of rhetorical art in language according to the different needs. This kind of language deviation or the art of rhetoric has been widely used in comedy lines, which brings an aesthetic taste of humorous and interesting with the good artistic effect.

### The theory of register and register variation

Register theory originated in the "contextualism", is the concept of situational context and cultural context proposed by an anthropologist Malinowski. Malinowski points out, "language context is the natural environment and social environment when people use language. Context consists of a series of subjective factors and objective factors, including communication object, purpose, occasion, time, place, a certain style, a certain context and so on, and all of these factors play an important controlling role in both selection and processing of language material." (Hu Zhuanglin 2001:80) Later, Firth takes the concept of context as the theory "register exists in the context" (Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, Zhang Delu, Li Zhanzi 2008:276-280). Halliday has inherited and developed the theory of Firth, in 1964 proposed the concept of "register". which refers to the "functional variety of language" (Chang Chenguang, Ding Jianxin, Zhou Hongyun 2008:185), "That is composed by many language features and situational characteristics —— especially refers to the field of discourse, tenor and mode of discourse meaning——and linked with the relative language features" (Halliday.M. A. K. & Hasan.R 1976:32), and it is caused by the change of language context, which is then improved the register theory. Up to 1985, Halliday constructed a relatively complete framework of register theory. Some domestic scholars believe that "register also has automatic regulation function, innovation function and social function." (Gao Shengwen 2013:3)The concept of register, at present, has become an important concept in systemic functional linguistics.

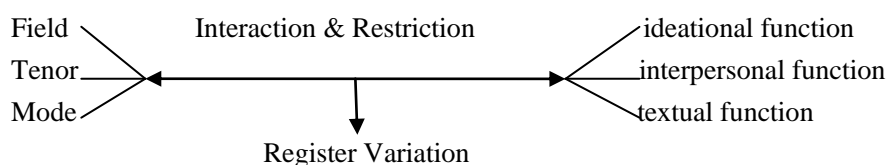
The symbol structure of register is constituted by three major elements, the language field, tenor and mode of discourse. And these three elements have a close relationship with the ideational

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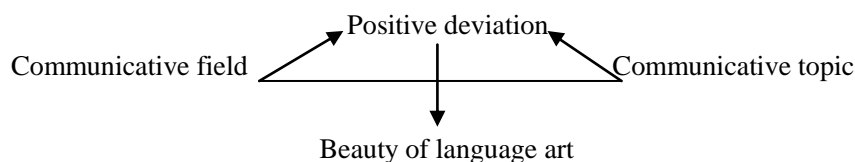
function, interpersonal function and textual function. (Ju Yumei 2011:112) According to the degree of official register, Hou Weirui divides it into the spoken and written language, informal and formal language. With the cooperation of three contextual elements, the elements can restrict the speaker on the choice of words and semantic structure. The change of any components in the contextual elements will bring the change of semantics, as well as the variation of language, and thus different registers appear. The three variables can promote the formation of different types of situation, resulting in different registers.

What is the register variation? Hou Weirui thinks, "the use of informal language is in formal situations or in serious topic, or the use of language is not in conformity with the relationship and status between discourse participants; or using formal language with strong pedantic tone in the verbal situation, will all cause the inappropriate feeling or other abnormal effect to the person, so these in linguistics are called register variation." (Hou Weirui 1998:86) In a word, register variation refers to the unconventional use of the language in the context, i.e. a deviation from the standard of language use. Language and its context have a very close relationship, but the language field, tenor and mode are the three variables in the context, which will produce a different register type with the various contexts, because the context and register also have a very close relationship. (Wang Lu 2012:164) Variation art of comedy lines, from the perspective of register variation, refers to the lines no longer cling to the specific context of language use, but to break through the limits of the context, resulting in register in a fuzzy state. This phenomenon is often reflected in the variation of language field, tenor, mode and so on, in the form of the characters in the works using language inconsistent with the related factors in context, or using informal language in a formal or serious occasion. Generally speaking, people mostly use one or two in three variables of different registers, which is determined by the need of communication. And the relation is shown as follows,



### Field variation

Field in language refers to the things or activities caused in the conversation, field, and communication, as well as the related things in the language activities. Communication in people's life must be carried out in a certain language field. Once determined the communication subject, the related communication behavior in the appropriate language field will be normally selected. If the communicative activities are away from the language field, or in another unrelated language field terms, the communication obviously can not have an interaction effect. However, when the expressions in the language field are in a positive deviation from the state, the situation will change in nature, which belongs to an unusual use of language, an artistic exchange activity, and has a very good effect on expressing. (Geng Hongyan 2008:126) As it is shown as follows,



For example, in the comedy works, the creators are often interested in deviating from the normal speech field, which produces rhetoric beauty works of the art of language. For example,

1. The married woman should pay attention to its own value-added, lest she would be miserable, being from a hot blue chip stock to the unwanted junk stock may. "*Marriage Guards Battle*"

The old man: without knowing, he then gathered our family, men and women, children and the old, all the members of the houses, to come to the meeting, for impeaching me. *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*

3. Baiyun: hurry up, what are you doing? Stop dawdling, you don't let people wait for me, it is not appropriate to be late! Why you are a man like this? I don't want to take you out! Quickly, find your own position. Where are you going, sit here?..... Thirsty, cough..... Thirsty!

Heitu: Didn't you just finished?

Baiyun: How, you want to revolt?

In example 1, the "value added", "blue chip", "junk" are the terms used to describe stocks, here, describing the value of a woman. In example 2, "members of the houses," "impeachment" are political terms, which has little to do with the common people, but here it is used with disproportionate common people family, with a kind of funny tone. In example 3, the "revolt" is a military term, here the Heitu uncle didn't give aunt Baiyun to pass water, causing her thirsty, then she blamed him "revolt". It is very interesting.

The above different styles of words, through the variation of rhetoric, all become words in the field of literature and art field, which makes the comedy lines unique and full of a strong artistic appeal, bringing an aesthetic enjoyment.

Sometimes, the language field variation is a way for people to achieve a certain pragmatic intention, making the different fields of discourse in hybrid dislocation, thus forming another unusual and seemingly absurd unreal a field of discourse, and it is that this shift of language art can make comedy, film and television drama humorous and interesting. For example,

The mother of Xu Lang, "Yeah, right, that's right, my son can directly take the grading test, is it right?" *Call for Love*

Fei Mo, "We have slept in the same bed for more than 20 years, a little aesthetic fatigue." *Mobile Phone*

Li Dazui: the MBA degree? What ah?

Lv Shusheng: MBA, you don't know it?

Shopkeeper Tie: MBA is married but available. *Rumored Wulin*

Tang Seng: Monk Tang is singing like this,

On--ly you--! With me to the west for the scriptures;

On--ly you--! Can kill the demon and the devil;

Only you can protect me, protect me from the devil crab and clam;Your ability is the largest, Only you--!

Zhi Zunbao: hey.....Tang Seng: On--ly You! Don't blame the master wordy; wear a gold ring on head, don't be afraid of death. *Journey to the west*

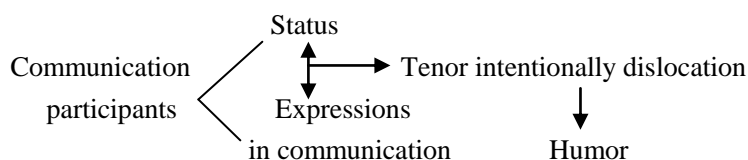
5. Liu Bei: Zilong, I've got a good idea. Let's make the foreign alliances, taking ledger cooperation without breaking even, which can be used to attack Caocao both in front and in rear. The proportion is, the foreigner 30%, and we 70%.

Cao Cao: To give him (Zhao Zilong) three dozens of milk, and you know which kind of brand. *Moonlight Treasure Box*

The example 1 of "grading" originally refers to obtain certificates through various kinds of examinations, and is suitable for examination or the relevant topics, and here refers to the marriage, resulting in the field of discourse deviation, so the language is vivid and lively. In example 2 the "aesthetic fatigue" is the professional terminology in aesthetic field, here it describes marital status, constituting a field of discourse deviation. It shows that, due to the long dull and formulaic marriage there is no freshness with the partner, and marriage is not a surprise, romantic relation. In examples from 3 to 6, the plots occurred in ancient times, but the line is in Mandarin, dialect, English and modern web language. They are not quite suitable for the historical times, social environment, but this field of discourse deviation makes the works received surprisingly artistic effect.

## Tenor variation

Tenor refers to the related social roles and activity goals in the communication. Tenor of discourse variation, usually refers to the use of language is not in conformity with the relationship between communication participants and their identity and status, which is a departure from the communicative role. In social situation, people always naturally play a social role in certain social relations, and the language use of the different roles is also different, such as language between the higher and lower levels, the older and the younger. If the character uses the language not meeting their identity or status, it will cause the tenor of discourse deviation, which often appears in sketches, movies. As it is shown,



For example:

Uncle Li: the will of the people scattered, and the team can not be easy to get together.

Uncle Li: Who knows me understand my needs, I'm a mystery to he who know me not. (*A World Without Thieves*)

Tong Xiangyu: I'm coming, Guo, give Zheng a pot Jasmine tea, old Xing, what's wrong with your voice?

Sheriff Xing: eating shark's fin will get excessive internal heat, so now I officially announce, the third son Hao Xiaohu of shopkeeper Hao in Xijie won the second place, in the youth piano competition held by Pinggu County (applause).....Although only three individual took part in the competition, and the third is a deaf.

Sheriff Xing: don't be upset, go to enjoy the wild game.

Tong Xiangyu: I don't like to, because it is easy to be sick if eat much..

Sheriff Xing: be sick?

Tong Xiangyu: (Mandarin) It is proved by scientific research, there is no big difference of nutrient elements between wild animals and livestock or poultry. And most wild animals are not healthy without any quarantine, thus, it is very likely to be infected with the disease when eating wild animals.

Sheriff Xing: Don't worry, if I get sick, I have Niuhuang Jiedu Tablets, which is used for heat clearing and detoxifying eliminating blood stasis and phlegm. For others, I will not tell him. *Rumored Wulin*

3. Li Dazui's mother: I have eaten more salt than your rice!

Li Dazui: Because you have a strong flavor!

Li Dazui's mother: I have walked more than you have done!

Li Dazui: That's because I'm lazy. *Rumored Wulin*

Uncle Li in the example 1 of is an experienced thief haunted around the world, but his language is often not consistent with his thief identity. In the first sentence, Uncle Li used the leader's mood, revealing a supreme position; simple and elegant language in the second sentence made a great contrast between this poem language and his social role, which produced a good comedy atmosphere, so, no wonder the audience can't help laughing when watching the movie. In communication situation, if without using the specific communicative language in accordance with the object, it also can produce the tenor of discourse deviation. As in example 2, the shopkeeper Tong and Sheriff Xing originally are talking about things in daily life, then Tong turned the talking to another topic, changing the accent from modified strong Shaanxi accent to standard Mandarin, just like in a similar news anchors posture, solemnly to preach the popular science knowledge; and the Sheriff Xing also took the time to start advertising, borrowed humorous Wei Fan's advertising line " For others, I will not tell ", which makes the works add a lot of comedy effect. Example 3, generally, when a son answers his mother, he always be respectful and polite, and Li Dazui in Example 3 is in the opposite. When his mother scolded him, he did not accept passively, but kept refuting with excuses, and full of ironic! The dialogue in a special mood causes the tenor of discourse variation, with a certain artistic effect. The dialog is not consistent with its status of the term; making the work present a peculiar and humorous expression effect.

## Mode variation

Mode refers to the language carrier forms in language activities, and also the verbal communication media or channels, which are in the oral form or written form, or the form between them. It is the way to express the specific communication according to communication object and real situation, such as conversations, interviews, programs in television, radio and certain written form.

In daily communication, even if the communication object is confirmed, while the interpersonal distance, experience distance relationship is not necessarily the same, so the way of communication and the use of language are not the same.

The humorous effect in some works is due to the deviation of language mode. And this language mode deviation is very common in the lines of comedy, dramas, movies and TV works. For example:

Li Qing: What's wrong with you, can't you see it? Can't you see Li Qing?

Liu Yuan: the night gives me black eyes, I saw that you looked at me; you are so transparent just like the ice in the glass. *No Parting No Seeing*

Landowner Liu: Nowadays, politics is in stable and harmonious, and people are diligent, policy is beneficial to the public. The best contribution for the government is the road repairing. that is the silver road. If people want to be rich, people must mend the road, plant more trees and

have less children, or how to welcome the Huatian meeting? *Huatian Cuo*  
After the beggar Xiaomi finished the meal offered by Li Dazui, he said with sad and deep feeling, "..... If God would like to give me a second chance, I will say three words to Li Dazui -- less salt, please!" *Rumored Wulin*

The example 1 uses the form of face-to-face communication, interpersonal distance is close, so the direct contact is with audio-visual in this scenario, and the information feedback also occurs in the moment. According to the routine, this communication process should be in oral form, but Liu Yuan used the slightly sad poem by poet Gu Cheng, " the night gives me black eyes, but I use it to look for light", to express his sad for blindness. This mode variation adds some humor to the composition. In example 2, Land owner Liu used the written language of the old drama in the first half sentence, while in the second half sentence he used modern slogan in today's one-child policy style, making people could not help laughing when hearing. This sentence in example 3 is a classic love confession from *Westward Journey*, formal style with sincere feelings, which took the audience into a formal discourse scene, while suddenly the utterance turned to the expression with a strong oral style "less salt", completely breaking the discourse field previously preset, beyond people's expectation, it makes the work humorous and interesting. If this sentence turns to "Li Dazui, your food is too salty, next time, remember to put less salt", then it seems simple and boring.

## Conclusion

Language variation is an inevitable phenomenon in language development. If there is no variation of language, there is no language development. "Language variation is omnipresent, which is the reflection of language diversity and sociality." (Wang Can 2007:188) Register variation is a kind of language style, which plays a very important role on the comedy lines. It satisfies people's curiosity about new things, and also enriches and develops the art of language, achieving the effect of humorous and interesting expression.

With certain social reason and language foundation, register variation appears frequently in comedy lines. At present, in the trend of diversified development, the public aesthetic taste and aesthetic requirements have changed greatly, and because of the mutual influence, mutual penetration of various language components from press, radio, film, television, advertising, mobile phone short message, network terminology etc. , it is very difficult for the language fields to stick to their own register, and thus they turn to deviate from their intrinsic register range, which create the various language components gathering together just like the sight of chorus.

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