

Linguistic Formation-Mechanism of Humor in English

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Abstract. Humorous language is everywhere. It is just like the seasoning in our food, making our conversation and life interesting, joyful and colorful. According to Palmer, a mechanism of humor may be concluded as follows: 1) Knowledge that the occasion is ‘entertainment’ which would act both as a humor stimulus and a brake on the sense of threat. (Here, the audience should be alert to the linguistic and paralinguistic form of the utterance which would signal the intention to joke.) 2) The incongruity is itself sufficiently acute to cause arousal but insufficiently acute to provide a threat. 3) Locating the comic meaning reveals retrospectively that the incongruity was not threatening. (Palmer, 1994: 100) Individual verbal humor is achieved mainly through language. People may use the rich variations of language elements to elicit humorous effect. In this paper, through the analysis of some common types of humor, the author tries to discover what makes a joke or humorous story funny from various linguistic aspects such as syntax, semantics, rhetoric, and so on.

Induction

Humor plays a significant role in people’s daily life, especially in communication. It makes the interpersonal association more pleasant through offering a relaxed and amusing talking atmosphere. It helps to reduce tension by means of providing an outlet for us to unburden our negative emotions rather than lead them out in a provocative and violent manner. It is regarded as a powerful weapon against hardship and misfortune. In short, it helps us maintain personal and social balance. The special function of humor has attracted the attention of many scholars. It is in the neighborhood of more than 2,000 years ago that people had begun the research on humor. However, the study of humor is a very complicated and multifaceted task, which covers different disciplines like linguistics, psychology, physiology, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, and so on. Thus, even up to now, “there is no single definition of humor acceptable to all investigations in the area. (Goldstein & McGhee, 1983: xxi). In the past thousands of years, it seems that humor was mainly the concern of philosophers and literary critics. Articles in humor study usually written by literary historians or ethnologists. It is not until several decades ago that linguists began to launch out into the field of humor. This paper attempts to analyse how humor is produced and what makes humor laughable only from the perspective of linguistic.

Humor Produced by Ambiguity

Generally speaking, if a language form (e.g. a word, phrase, sentence, or other communication) can be rationally interpreted in more than one way, it is called ambiguous. Many linguists claim that ambiguity is a kind of linguistic phenomena and it exists not only in linguistic unit, including word, phrase, sentence, etc, but also in the practical use of language. On the one hand, ambiguity brings about misunderstanding in our life, on the other hand, it also contributes a lot to verbal humor. Ambiguity is regarded as one of the most important source of humor and is frequently employed as a means to produce humorous effect. Ambiguity humor is a mistake or clash of different meanings. It may contain double or multiple meanings, sounds, or even gestures, which are understood in a wrong way, or in incongruous ways. The following sections will mainly centre on humor caused by phonological ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, and semantic ambiguity.

Humor Produced by Phonological Ambiguity

In the real communication, if a pronunciation can be understood in more than one way, we call this phenomenon phonological ambiguity. Humor generated by phonological ambiguity primarily includes the following two kinds:

1) the one created owing to the existence of homophone;

Homophone is defined as a word which sounds the same as another but different in meaning or spelling. For instance, “awful” and “aweful”, “knew” and “new”, “to”, “too” and “two”. Let's look at the following example:

One day, an English learner, who has begun to learn English for only a short time, bumped against an American in the street. The English learner said, “I'm sorry.” The American said, “I'm sorry, too.” The English learner said, “I'm sorry three.” The American felt puzzled and asked, “What are you sorry for?” At a loss, the English learner said, “I'm sorry five.”

(<http://www.haha365.com>)

Because “too” and “two”, “for” and “four” share the same pronunciation, but different in meaning, misunderstanding sometimes tends to occur, thus leading to the humorous effect.

2) the one produced because of the different locations of stress to the same word or sentence.

Different locations of the stress of a word or a sentence can also bring about laughing. For example:

At both John and Tom's wedding ceremony, the master said, “Now John will kiss his bride and Tom will kiss his bride, too.”

(<http://joke.nuc.cn/joke/87/478.html>.)

When the second “his” is stressed, it means that John kissed his wife and Tom kissed his own wife, too. It's normal. But, when the second “his” is not stressed, it means John kissed his wife and Tom kissed John's wife, too. The master deliberately laid no stress on the second “his”, so all the people laughed.

Humor Produced by Lexical Ambiguity.

Homonym and polysemy are the basic peculiarities of human language. They are also the main sources of lexical ambiguity. There are some slight differences between homonym and polysemy. Homonym refers to a word or a phrase which has both the same sound and spelling as another, but their meanings different and unrelated. While polysemy are words in the same pronunciation and form, which have different but related meanings. Here are two jokes created by lexical ambiguity.

A school teacher and a principal of a high school are concerned because some boys and girls have been seen kissing on the school playground. The teacher says to the students, “The principal and I have decided to stop kissing on the school playground.”

Hearing some laughter, she senses her message was not altogether clear so she adds. “What I mean to say is that there will be no more kissing going on under our noses.

(New College English, Book 3, 2000: 19)

In the joke, there are two ambiguities. One is “stop” which can mean “to cease continuing an activity” or “to prevent”. The other is “under our noses” which can be literally interpreted as “(to kiss) on a spot under the nose” or figuratively as “right in front of someone, quite openly”. So the school teacher's explanation does nothing to clarify what she said at the beginning but makes the joke more laughable.

Humor produced by semantic ambiguity

Due to the different grammatical functions of sentence elements, the relationships between or among sentence elements are usually varied. Different interpretations can be given from the surface structure and the deep structure of a sentence. Generally speaking, when the meaning of the deep structure is opposite or in contrast to the meaning of the surface structure, not only semantic ambiguity arises but also humor generates. Many jokes are created on the basis of this phenomena.

Teacher: When was Rome built?

Tom: At night.

Teacher: Who told you that?

Tom: You did. You said Rome wasn't built in a day.

(<http://joke.nuc.cn/joke/87/478.html>)

The surface meaning of the sentence "Rome wasn't built in a day." is that the building of Rome was not in the period of light. That's to say, it is at night. However, as you know, it is a proverb, which means, "Great cause can't be accomplished within one day. So long as you stick it out you are sure to succeed." The inconformity of the deep meaning and the surface meaning makes the story funning.

"Professor, I did the best I could on the test. I really don't think I deserve a zero."

"Neither do I. But that's the lowest grade I'm allowed to give."

(College English, Book 1, 2004, 236)

The focus of negation can be placed on the word "think" or "deserve", which will carry totally different meanings. When the negation is on the word "think", it means it's unfair to give me a zero. I deserve a higher mark. But when the negation is on the word "deserve", the meaning changes completely, which means "zero" is much for me. I should be given a mark much lower than zero.

Humor produced by rhetoric

According to Encyclopedia of Rhetoric. Rhetoric is one of the three original liberal arts or trivium in Western culture. The other two members are dialectic and grammar. During its long history of 2500 years, the notion of rhetoric has changed from time to time. Today, rhetoric is defined as the art of persuasion through language. In other words, rhetoric is an art of speaking or writing so as to persuade people effectively. Meanwhile, the term rhetoric sometimes can be employed to refer to form of argumentation, often with the pejorative connotation that rhetoric is a means of obscuring the truth. Rhetoric is also an important source of humor

Humor produced by rhyme

Rhyme is one of the poet's most important techniques. A rhyme is a repetition identical or similar sounds in two or more different words. The term rhyme usually refers to the repetition of sounds at the end of rhymed words. A wise husband wrote an epitaph for his wife using the technique of rhyme achieve a surprising effect

Here lies my wife, here let her lie!

Now she's at rest, and so am I

(<http://www.comedy-zone.net/jokes/laugh/culture/cult5.htm>)

From the short epitaph, we know that the wife was wordy and garrulous and the husband was suffering from his wife's chattering for ages. The husband vividly described his wife's disposition and their relationship in marriage within two short rhymed sentences.

Humor produced by alliteration

Alliteration is also most frequently used in poetry. When writers want to emphasize certain words, they may use alliteration. If the initial sound (usually consonant) of two or more closely following words is the same or similar, it is called alliteration. In other words, it has two or more neighboring words beginning with the same sound. Alliteration makes the words to be emphasized stand out and becomes one of the important methods to produce humorous effect. Please have a look at the following words of a song by Carbon Leaf.

Mary Mac's mother's making Mary Mac marry me.

My mother 's making me marry Mary Mac.

Will I always be so merry when Mary's taking care of me?

Will I always be so merry when I marry Mary Mac?

(<http://www.comedy-zone.net/jokes/laugh/culture/cult5.htm>)

The beginning sounds of the words in the first two lines are all 'm'. The author uses alliteration humorously expressing Mary's unwillingness and 'mine' to marry each other forced by their mothers.

Humor and puns

A pun is defined by Joel Sherzer (Fan Jiakai, 1992) as “a form of speech play in which a word or phrase unexpectedly and simultaneously combines two unrelated meanings”. A pun usually carries two meanings, which are very different--one is quite proper while the other is often, but not always, vulgar. Because of this, pun is frequently exploited to produce humor, though puns are thought of by some scholars as the lowest form of humor. There are some ingredients for the realization of pun: quick setup (brevity is important), no proper names (listener might not recognize the name), familiar references, a pointed revelation (you should see the spark in the listeners eyes as they ‘get it’), and finally, maximum wordplay throughout.

Gerald. R. Ford, the 38th president of the United States, liked to use puns in his talks. One day, when answering the questions of the reporters, he said, “I’m a Ford, not a Lincoln.”

It's well-known that Lincoln is the name of the great president in American history and also a brand of the famous high-grade cars. Ford, however, was a cheap but popular car at that time. By saying so, Ford intended, on the one hand, to show his modesty, on the other hand, to parade himself as a president loved by the populace.

Humor produced by metaphor

Metaphor is defined by Burke as a device for seeing something in terms of something else. (Burke, 1945: 50.) It enables us to use an idea, word, phrase or object in place of another to indicate a likeness between them. Metaphor is in widespread use in both language and communication. Hoffman (1983) estimates that the average English-speaker uses over 3,000 metaphors per week and suggests we can occasionally use four metaphors per minute in everyday conversation. Bowers (1993) suggests that all human thinking is metaphorical at its core. That's to say, we often think, reason and process information in terms of metaphorical examples and concepts. Naturally, metaphor is commonly exploited to create humorous stories. For example:

Everyone has a photographic memory. Some just don't have film.
(<http://www.home-ed.co.uk/giggles.html>)

Here the writer compares human's memory to a camera. The process of memorizing is just like taking photographs. Camera is important, so is film. But for film, nothing can be taken down. The writer humorously satirizes those forgetful persons who act like a camera without film.

Conclusion

As a means and an end of interpersonal communication, humor is the nuclear part of all cultures, languages, idiolects, and registers of speech. It is a pervasive phenomenon that penetrates every aspect of social life. Strangely enough, study on humor is not reckoned with but even laughed at. Humor is still considered a marginal field of all academic researches. Linguistics, until the recent few decades, had been a negligible player in the study of humor. Encouragingly, the past twenty years had witnessed the first semantic and pragmatic theories on humor. Linguistics is now one of the leading fields in humor research. A lot of linguists such as J. L. Austin, H. P. Grice, Sperber, Wilson, Raskin, etc, have contributed a lot in this field, which leads humor study into a new era.

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