

The Humor of “The Daily Show” from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: This study examines the translation of humorous discourse in European and American talk shows from the perspective of translation relevance theory to verify its interpretive effect on translation activities. According to the analysis, the famous American TV show “The Daily Show” profoundly embodies the essence of language from the perspective of relevance theory — communicative activities, and the translator’s translation of humorous language in it achieves a balance between maximum relevance and optimal relevance, achieving a good humorous transmission effect.

Keywords: Relevance theory; Humor; The Daily Show

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1. Introduction

Humorous discourse is a form of communication that makes people laugh. The speaker uses hyperbole, metaphor, irony, metonymy, pun, euphemism, imitation, and other rhetorical devices to create a humorous effect by taking advantage of the context ^[1]. Humor is popular because it contains wisdom and thought under the packaging of taste, building a bridge of understanding and communication for both parties in communication. As a result, American college students prefer to learn about current affairs through political talk shows rather than orthodox news programs, and The Daily Show is their first choice.

Humor is closely related to a country’s history, culture, and society. Because of the great differences in national conditions, the message conveyed by some humorous remarks may be easily understood by the domestic audience, while the foreign audience may be confused or even misunderstood due to the lack of background knowledge. Whether they can understand the humorous remarks depends on whether the conversion of language expression is successful. A successful humor should retain the style and humorous effect of the source language, and the host’s intention should be highly consistent with the audience’s expectations ^[2]. To this end, the translation, as an interlingual tool for information dissemination, should properly examine the differences and maximize the effect of understanding equality between domestic and foreign audiences. Humor aims to bring joy to people. If

the translation fails to make people laugh, it loses its meaning, and thus loses its reason for existence^[3].

The Daily Show, one of the most influential late-night news political satire talk shows in the United States, has received 35 Emmy nominations for Best Talk Show and Best Screenplay since its debut in 1996, winning 25 of them. Host Jon Stewart is witty and incisive in speech, vivid in performance, and delivers fair and humanistic views. The show is positioned as a spoof of news, in the form of a traditional news program, with the host speaking and interspersed with TV footage of a “journalist’s” commentary^[4]. In addition, the Daily Show invites celebrity guests or politicians to the scene to pick the hottest news or political events and comment on them in a spoof tone. One of the highlights of the show is that the host not only adds light-hearted jokes to parody news, but more often it shows thought-provoking humor^[5].

Compared with the translation of humor in literary works, the humor in talk shows is more colloquial and covers a wide range of topics. So, within a short period of time, when a talk show host throws out a joke, it is difficult for non-native speakers to digest the humorous elements in the message in a timely manner, which poses a challenge for the translation of humor in talk shows — how to make foreign audiences understand quickly while capturing the funny points.

2. Relevance theory and humor

The theory of related translation was first proposed by Ernst August Gutt in 1991^[6]. According to this theory, translation is essentially a cross-cultural communication process involving three subjects — the author, the translator, and the reader. In this process, the translator, as the recipient of the original text and the initiator of the translation, needs not only to infer the explicit and implicit information of the author, but also to consider the knowledge reserve and cognitive ability of the reader in order to convey the information of the original text to the reader more accurately.

Spager and Wilson further developed the relevance theory, suggesting that both the translator’s understanding of the author’s communicative intention of the original text and the reader’s understanding of the translator’s communicative intention are closely related to “relevance”, which refers to the relationship between assumptions in different contexts. Here, contextual assumptions, as the name suggests, refer to assumptions made about the specific context of speech, and contextual effects refer to the conclusions drawn from further reasoning about these assumptions^[7]. Different contextual assumptions produce different correlations and thus achieve different contextual effects.

Whether the translator is translating or the reader is reading, it takes some effort to infer the contextual effect. The effort referred to here is called the inferential effort, while the effect of context that is closest to the communicative intention of the original author is called the best context effect. Inferential effort and contextual effect together determine the strength of relevance. At the level of discourse comprehension, the greatest relevance means achieving the greatest contextual effect with the least inferential effort, while the best relevance means achieving the best contextual effect through more effective inferential effort^[8]. An example is shown as follows.

A: Can I borrow your book?

B: Books will become shabby or dirty.

C: A is such a good person, logical, sincere to friends, and principled!

Regarding whether B agreed to lend A the book, B only stated his own opinion on lending A the book and did not give a direct answer, but it is not difficult to see that B was unwilling to lend the book. In fact, in the above

example, the difficulty for the reader to understand is not what B says but what C says. When reading this sentence in C, it is easy for the reader to form the contextual assumption that A is a good person with many valuable qualities. Under this assumption, the reader can derive the contextual effect of “C praising A” with minimal effort of inference, and thus this contextual assumption is most relevant to the original text. However, if the reader has a certain understanding of A through the previous content, with more effective contextual inferences, the contextual effect of “C appears to praise A but is actually ironic” may be derived. Compared with the former, the context effect of the latter is richer and closer to the communicative intention of the original author, so the context assumption of the latter has the best relevance to the original text.

The above examples help us better understand the concepts of maximum relevance and best relevance. Since the best contextual effect is closest to the author’s communicative intention, the translator should pursue the best relevance in the translation process to ensure that the author’s communicative intention is conveyed to the greatest extent.

Why do humorous words have the effect of making people laugh? Relevance theory explains it from the perspective of communication. First of all, the core mechanism by which humor works is the contrast of information between the greatest relevance and the best relevance. Human communication and cognition are governed by the principle of relevance. Humans tend to reason based on the maximum degree of relevance, but in communication, there is only one information of the best relevance that makes a conversation valid. Since the maximum and best connections point to different communicative meanings in humorous discourse, the humor of humorous discourse comes from the contrast in meaning between the maximum and best connections. Humor comes with surprise and understanding when there is a contrast between the audience’s expectation of the maximally relevant information and the best relevance that holds true in the context.

Next comes the contrast between the relevance of the information and the effort the listener makes to infer. Relevance is a relative concept whose strength depends on two factors: inferential effort and contextual effect, while relevance is inversely proportional to inferential effort. If the context effect is good, the reader will need to exert less effort and the relevance will be stronger; If the context effect is poor, the reasoning effort is greater and the relevance is weaker. The speaker is always very indirect in expressing meaning, which means that humorous remarks are not very relevant. It has little contextual effect, and it takes a lot of effort for humorous speakers to discover its relevance and correctly understand its meaning. But this extra effort of inference is compensated in the form of an additional contextual effect, which is the pleasure gained in understanding humorous discourse.

3. The humor of The Daily Show from the perspective of relevance theory

Humor can be classified in various ways depending on different criteria. From the perspective of how humor is formed, Henri Bergson, a famous French philosopher of the 20th century, believes that humor can be divided into two categories: verbal humor and situational humor. Dr. William Frye Jr. (1963) of Stanford University and the Ukrainian scholar Pocheptsov have made similar classifications of humor. According to Pocheptsov, situational humor can be further divided into two types: one based on the difference or incompatibility between the characteristics of things and their essential attributes (such as a monkey trying to imitate human behavior); The other is based on the ambiguity of the situation, and the essence of its humor stems from different interpretations of the situation and unexpectedly correct explanations. Debra divides humor into three categories: universal humor, linguistic humor, and cultural humor^[9]. The following will analyze the translation of humor in the Daily

Show based on Debra's classification.

Unlike contextual humor, linguistic humor rarely relies on context. By using the variability of language elements, language humor can produce humorous effects. This use of the variability of language elements can be attributed to English rhetorical devices, and thus it can also be called humor derived from rhetorical devices (such as puns, metaphors, hyperbole, parody, paradoxical rhetoric, irony, yoke collocation, sudden descent, etc.). According to the definition of "wordplay" in the Oxford Dictionary, it is a literary technique as well as a form of humor in which the words used become the main theme of the work, and the main purpose is to achieve the desired effect or entertainment ^[10]. In Delia Chiaro's view, the term "wordplay" encompasses all conceivable ways of using language for entertainment purposes. De la Bastilta defines word games as "a collective term for various textual phenomena in which the structural features of language are exploited or developed to give rise to communicative conflicts between two or more language structures that are more or less similar in form but more or less different in meaning." It is very difficult to translate English word games into Chinese because of the significant differences in spelling, pronunciation, and language structure. This requires the translator to be more flexible and creative, retaining as much humor as possible from the original text.

3.1. Example 1: Word-imitation translation

Donald Trump put this on social media: Don't be weak. Don't be stupid. Don't be a Panican.

Donald Trump posted this on social media: Don't be weak, don't be silly, don't be a panicker.

The original text itself uses panic and the suffix -an to create a new word. If translated literally, it would be "panicked person", but that would be dull and lose its original funny point. The translator, taking into account the political context of the passage, namely the alternating rule of two parties in the US government and the frequent public criticism of the Democratic Party by Trump as a Republican, translated it as "the Panic Party man", conveying a humorous message at the lexical level. Similar approaches include sleepy Joe and Crooked Hillary, which employ the proper noun structure familiar to Chinese audiences — "identity/occupation + name", while keeping the number of characters within three, making them witty and concise, such as Clay Man Zhang and Kite King ^[11].

3.2. Example 2: Annotated translation

It didn't have to happen like this.... But he had to go full Teresa.

And tariffs don't have to be like this... But he has to go with Theresa's.

Note: It refers to the famous scene where American reality TV star Theresa Giddis lifts the table on a TV show.

Some humorous remarks incorporate social and cultural contexts, such as talk show hosts often quoting people or stories that are well-known to the audience to achieve an exaggerated humorous effect ^[12]. In this case, because Trump's tariff reform measures are too radical and even absurd, the host compares him to the reality TV star Theresa, who throws the table over at the slightest disagreement. This rhetoric brings the abstract and obscure economic strategy back to the rough and intuitive actions of everyday life, making it easy for the audience to understand and leaving them with the impression of absurdity. American audiences are mostly familiar with Theresa, but since Chinese audiences know nothing about her, they can only understand the comparison by adding annotations, but overall adding annotations still detracts from the humorous effect because it undermines the real-time nature of the humor ^[13].

3.3. Example 3: Contrastive translation

Original text: One top banker told the paper that he feels liberated because now he can use offensive words without fear of getting canceled at work. I can tell you today that that top banker is definitely using both of those words right now.

I think the big banker told us that he felt relieved because he could use offensive and uncivilized words. I can tell you today that the big banker was definitely using those two words.

This is a typical case of situational humor. When Donald Trump first took office, he was known for his lenient regulation of the financial industry, and bankers felt that freedom of speech was restored and there was no need to worry about political correctness all the time^[14]. Three months have passed and Trump's global fund's tariff policy has cast a huge doubt on the stability of the U.S. economy and trade, causing investors to lose confidence and the stock market to fall to its lowest level in five years. Bankers should be on the verge of collapse at this time. The same discourse has taken a 180-degree turn due to the shift in the situation. The main target of this US trade war is China, so Chinese audiences are equally familiar with the background information^[15]. With the stock market plummeting, financial practitioners are naturally on high alert. Here, a literal translation can be used to convey humorous messages.

4. Conclusion

Since relevance theory emphasizes the communicative nature of language, it can effectively guide the humor of spoken language. The humorous discourse of the Talk Show is diverse and involves a wide range of background knowledge, and its translation needs to be handled flexibly according to the specific information. But no matter what translation strategy is chosen, the translator should always take into account the background knowledge and cognitive patterns of the audience, understand the mechanism of humor, create the contrast between the greatest relevance and the best relevance in the translation, and promote the cross-cultural dissemination of humorous discourse.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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