

# The Analysis of Cold Jokes Based on Relevance Theory

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**Abstract**—Cold joke, a neologism popular in recent years, is worth noticing. This paper gives a comprehensive definition of cold joke according to definitions claimed on the Internet and by other scholars. Thus, the attributes of cold joke different from ordinary joke is conspicuous. Then, based on Relevance Theory, the cause of cold humorous effect is analyzed in detailed examples. The ostensive-inferential communication, the factors to assess the degree of relevance, gap between optimal relevance and the biggest relevance as well as the weakest relevance are applied to explain the cause of laughter generation from the perspectives of the cold joke itself, the speaker, and the listener. The analysis helps readers to have a deeper understanding of humorous effect caused by cold jokes.

**Index Terms**—cold joke, relevance theory, ostensive-inferential communication, optimal relevance

## I. INTRODUCTION

One function of language is recreation: to please human and provide fun. In other words, language is an indispensable carrier of humor. As a new and special kind of humor, cold joke has been popular in recent years. In daily life, cold jokes are spoken to create a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere in communication, reflecting the humor as well as the intelligence of speakers. Numerous researches have been done about humor from the pragmatic perspective but there are only a small number of studies on cold joke without specific definition. Why it is called "cold" joke? What are the categories of the cold joke? How does the humorous effect generate and can be achieved in communication? These questions are worth thinking and solving.

Through the qualitative study, this paper is written firstly based on the method of reading relevant books and references to get a deeper understanding of theories and principles of pragmatics that are helpful and related to the research of the cold joke. Second, many cold jokes selected from Internet and articles as examples are analyzed from the angle of Relevance Theory put forward by Sperber and Wilson.

This paper firstly makes a brief introduction about cold joke, including its definition and kinds classified by features. In the second part, principles of relevance theory including ostensive-inferential communication, the optimal relevance, the maximal relevance, the weakest relevance, contextual effect and processing effort are explained and employed to demonstrate the features of cold joke and how its humorous effect generates.

## II. ABOUT COLD JOKE

### A. *The Definition of Cold Joke*

In China, cold joke is funny by virtue of being not actually funny at all. The name comes from the fact that when one hears a cold joke, he shivers in terror instead of laughing because the joke is so bad. From Mandarin Chinese, it is called "leng xiao hua". Therefore, "cold joke" is the free translation from Chinese. Different from "hot" (ordinary) joke that makes the hearers roar with laughter immediately, cold joke will not achieve the humor effect at beginning but latter arouse a moment of awkward silence, which the word "cold" in cold joke refers to, in Chinese meaning "冷场". There are many other translations from this Chinese word like gag-less, anti-humor, gag in Hong Kong, "烂梗" in Taiwan. In this paper, "cold joke" is used since it vividly reflects its definition and Chinese characteristics.

At present, there is no authoritative definition of cold joke in any dictionaries. However, several definitions appear on the Internet from both net citizens and scholars. In conclusion, the definition of the cold joke is summarized as follows: the cold joke is the joke which is of unconventionally logic and not compatible with facts by the use of rhetorical devices, phonograms, polysemes. The end is often out of convention, logic, and practical life. The addressee first may feel confused because it is hard to find where the point of laughter is, and finally smile faintly after pondering for seconds. "Cold" means that silence appears after the addresser has told a cold joke, and the listener will not laugh fully and delightfully or even feel boring. Nevertheless, it still makes people relax mentally. At the same time, some pictures with a few words are also viewed as cold jokes published on the Micro blog. In this thesis, only textual cold jokes are chosen to discuss.

### B. *Categories of Cold Joke*

In terms of textual style, cold jokes can be classified as narration and question-and-answer.

First, with regard to narrative style, cold jokes with such structure are short stories, several connected events, and conversations in a specific context.

(1) A wolf cub never ate meat but took only vegetarian food. Its parents worried about that a lot. One day, however, to their delight, they found the little wolf chasing after a rabbit. The cub caught the rabbit and said: “Hand in your carrots immediately!”

The second structure is question-and-answer. Generally, the speaker puts forward a question seeming hard, leaving a few seconds for the listener who usually fails to give a “correct” answer. Finally, the correct answer from the speaker is often out of expectation. One typical example is brain teaser.

(2) Question: who ran fastest in history? Answer: Cao Cao (an eminent statesman and militarist during the end of the Eastern Han dynasty). This answer is inferred from a proverb: talk of the devil, and he is sure to appear. (说曹操, 曹操到). The devil refers to Cao Cao. Therefore, Cao Cao is the man who ran fastest.

According to the way that humor is generated, cold jokes are divided into six types.

First, use similar sounds such as homophone, homonym and polysemant.

(3) A: Why number nine is scared of number seven? B: Because seven ate (eight) nine.

(4) A: If you want my daughter to marry you, you should at last tell me one thing positive about you. B: I am HIV positive.

Second, slip of tongue. Some examples are given here.

(5) When the airplane is going to land, an airline hostess says tenderly, “The toilet is landing. Please don’t go to the airplane.”

Third, use different logic.

(6) A: When will 1 plus 1 equal to 3? B: When it is wrong, the result is 3.

Fourth, use translation. Examples are the following Chinese dialogues.

(7) 甲: 知道蜘蛛人是什么颜色吗? 乙: 红色。甲: 错, 是白色。不信你念蜘蛛人的英文: Spider man (是白的)。The color of the Spider man is white because the word “Spider” has similar sound with the Chinese phrase “是白的”。

Fifth, use Chinese phonetic alphabet abbreviation (Liu Yueyue, 2010).

(8) Which electrical appliance brand is the ugliest? It’s TCL.

哪个牌子的电器最难看? TCL(太丑了)

Which electrical appliance brand is the smelliest? It’s TCL.

哪个牌子的电器最臭? TCL(太臭了)

Which electrical appliance brand is the most inferior? It’s TCL.

哪个牌子的电器最次? TCL(太次了)

Sixth, combine several methods (Liu Yueyue, 2010).

(9) Guess an English sentence from “AAAAABBBBBBABABBBBB”. The answer is “Longtime no see”.

### III. ANALYSES OF COLD JOKES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF RELEVANCE THEORY

Relevance theory was first put forward by Sperber and Wilson in the book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* published in 1986 and revised in 1995. It provides a new approach to study human communication which based on a general view of human cognition, elaborating and modifying Conversational Implicature Theory proposed by Grice. It is based on a definition of relevance and two general principles: the *Cognitive Principle* that human cognition tends to be great to the maximization of relevance; and the *Communicative Principle* that utterance creates expectations of relevance. Relevance theory, including ostensive-inferential communication, contextual effect and processing effort, the optimal relevance, the biggest relevance and the weakest relevance, is applied to analyze the cause of humor from perspectives of listener and the cold joke itself.

#### A. Ostensive-inferential Communication

In the book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* the ostensive-inferential communication is defined as follows:

The communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions {I} (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 63).

Human beings play the roles of speakers and hearers. In most cases, speakers intend to let the hearers be aware of the intention beyond the utterance, while listeners tend to make an effort to recognize and infer the intention of information from the speakers. Just as Sperber and Wilson claim, communication is successful not when hearers recognize the linguistic meaning of the utterance, but when they infer the speaker’s ‘meaning’ from it (1995, p. 23).

From the angle of listener or audience, therefore, in order to get the “cold” point or the point of laughter in cold jokes, the audiences need to infer the meaning based on the ostensive information from speakers, although the inference needs longer time compared with that of ordinary joke. The “cold” humorous effect is achieved in this way. It is clearly seen in the below example.

(10) Teacher: "Find America on the map for me, Johnny." Johnny: "Here it is, sir." Teacher: "That's right. Now, Sammy, who discovered America?" Sammy: "Johnny, sir."

It is well that America was first discovered by Columbus in 1492. Accordingly, the expected answer should be "Columbus". But Sammy considered Johnny as the discoverer. The listener may feel confused and ridiculous about the answer at first sight, which is the "cold" moment mentioned before. Making an inference on account of this conversation, the listener will find that Johnny distorted the teacher's meaning and mistook the question as "who has just discovered America on the map" in that the teacher didn't set a specific background. From the angle of Johnny, his answer is logic but beyond the expectation of the teacher and the listener. In such case, the laughing point is triggered.

#### B. *The Optimal Relevance and the Maximal Relevance*

In the light of Relevance Theory, each communicative action itself has the maximal relevance as well as the optimal relevance. The optimal relevance is defined as follows:

An utterance is optimally relevant if, and only if: (a) It is at least relevant enough to be worth processing; (b) It is the most relevant one compatible with speaker's abilities and preference (He Ziran, 2003, p.242)

In order to gain the optimal relevance, the contextual effect of the discourse should catch listener's attention, and the listener would try best to make inference for a better contextual effect. It is claimed by Sperber and Wilson that the optimal relevance gained by listener is the key to successful communication. However, the maximal relevance, from the angle of listener, is to achieve the greatest possible effects by the least possible effort in the comprehension of utterance. Human cognition usually accords with the maximal relevance (He Ziran & Ran Yongping, 2009, p.317). Therefore, optimal relevance is the speaker's presupposed relevance while the maximal relevance is about the listener's smallest effort to get the most effective context owing to economy. The two sometimes is the same but also sometimes different as a result of various cognitive contexts such as logic knowledge, encyclopedic knowledge, and vocabulary ability.

Accordingly, the gap between the maximal relevance and the optimal relevance in cold jokes causes the effect of humor. The sharper the contrast between the two is, the stronger the cold humorous effect will be. For instance, there is a short conversation between a little boy and his father.

(11) Little boy: Daddy, I want to get married. Father said jokingly: "Oh! Who did you have in mind?" Little boy: "Grandma." Father: "Wait for a minute. You did not think that I'd let you marry my mother, did you?" Little boy: "Why not? You married mine."

On hearing the question from the little boy, the father might suppose that his little son had good feelings with a girl classmate or neighbor except "grandma"—the maximal relevance in the father's and may also in the listener's mind. Again, the father might consider his son was joking. But the reason given by the little boy actually was the father had married the little boy's mother, so he would also marry his father's mother—grandma. The audience may feel confused at the first sigh of "your mother (the father's mother)" and need to rethink it. As audience, our blankness or previous understanding is in a sharp contrast with the expectation of the humorist, for which the cold humorous point is achieved.

#### C. *The Optimal Relevance and the Weakest Relevance*

The analysis based on the tow relevance is from the perspective of cold joke itself. As what is mentioned before, to get the optimal relevance stands for the success of verbal communication. Listeners tend to infer the speaker's intention in accordance with the utterance so as to gain the optimal relevance. However, in some cold jokes, especially Chinese cold jokes, totally two different explanations are provided towards the same word or phrase, which is also called disguised replacement of concept. In this case, the speaker usually first utters a familiar concept, which is easily known to the listener for the purpose of enough contextual effect with little effort, i.e. the optimal relevance. Nevertheless, the final result often violates the convention and intentionally relates something to highlight the absurd content of the cold jokes. Unexpected to the listener, the real relevance is the weakest relevance. The generation of laughter is in the procedure of finding and finally fixing the relevance (Liu Yueyue, 2010). The weaker the relevance is, the "colder" the humorous effects are. Here are two examples.

(12) 台湾什么时候会想要统一? 买方便面的时候。(When will Taiwanese desire to reunite to the motherland? It's when they want to buy instant noodles.)

(13) 有一天有个婆婆坐公交车, 坐到中途婆婆不认识路了, 婆婆用棍子打司机屁股说: 这是哪? 司机: 这是我的屁股...。(One day, an old lady went to somewhere by bus. But she didn't recognize the bus route after sitting for a while and therefore got lost. She asked the driver, poking his hips by the walking stick, "where is it?" the driver said, "It's my ass".)

In example (12), the addressee cannot discover the real intention of the addresser until in the end. When making effort to get the inside relevance, the addressee would find it hard to give a reasonable answer about when Taiwan will be retaken until the addresser bring to light the answer seeming unrelated or weakly related. Hence, the listener must look back at the cold joke and reinterpret it according to the exposed relevance. The first "统一" (unification) means to come together again after a long period of separation or disunity, whereas the latter refers to a well-known brand of fast noodles in China. The two conceptions are almost unrelated. If the speaker asks by providing enough information that when the Taiwanese think of the Tong Yi fast noodles? The answer naturally falls to the moment when they plan to buy the fast noodles. That's really a successful communication. However, the humorous effect disappears for the lack of

gaps between the optimal relevance and the primarily appeared weakest relevance, let alone the cold effect.

It is the same case with example (13). The meaning of “where” turns into “where is the body part that the old lady poke”. The contrast between the two relevance triggers the cold point. The unexpected but seemingly logical answer causes the generation of laughter.

#### D. Contextual Effect and Processing Effort

Relevance is a matter of degree. The contextual effects of an assumption in a given context and the processing effort involved in achieving contextual effect are the two factors to be taken into account in assessing the degree of relevance. The relationship between relevance and contextual effects and that between relevance and processing effort are explained by Sperber and Wilson as follows:

Extent condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large. Extent condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small (19969, p.125).

Sperber and Wilson also compare the concept of relevance to that of productivity, which involve some form of cost-benefit analysis. A firm with output, no matter how small, has the ability of yield to some degree just as the relationship between an assumption with any contextual effects and relevance of different degree. Meanwhile, there is another factor: production cost or input, which is analogized to the processing effort made by the addressee. The one with the lower production costs (processing efforts) would be considered the more productive (relevant). Therefore, to assess the degree of relevance is what to assess the extent of productivity that is a matter of balancing output (contextual effect) against input (processing effort).

When dealing with the information from speakers, people are inclined to find out a kind of context where the least effort (cost) is made to obtain the greatest contextual effect (benefit). Nevertheless, speakers often indirectly express the intended meaning of a cold joke that is not so relevant. In this way, listeners have to pay more processing effort for the purpose of relevance. But the cost listeners additionally pay during the process of hearing the cold joke would be balanced resulting from the additional contextual effect of cold humor. The input in fact is less than output. So the cold joke is relevant to some extent.

Take cold joke (14) for example.

(14) The reason for being late. A teacher asked a boy, “Johnny, why are you late for school every morning?” the boy replied, “Every time I come to the corner, a guidepost says, ‘School—Go Slow’.”

When hearing the question, the listener may suppose a lot of possible reasons such as waking up late with his or her experience and background knowledge activated. But the final answer, which is out of expectation, makes the listener pay more effort to perceive the relevance of the guidepost. The result is that Johnny regards the slogan warning cars to slow down as a reminder that students must go slowly around school. The foolish behavior of Johnny is the laughing point. Thus, the additional processing efforts are repaid by unexpected contextual effects—the pleasure caused by the cold jokes. That’s also the reason why people prefer to appreciate cold jokes although more cost is paid.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Qualitative research is applied in this paper. Firstly, the definition of cold joke is explained so as to make a distinction between cold joke and ordinary joke. Then, Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory is used for the analysis of the cause of laughter generation. In conclusion, the ostensive-inferential model demonstrates how the addressee gets the humorous point after hearing a cold joke; the contrast between the optimal relevance and the biggest relevance and the gap between the optimal relevance and the weakest relevance are also the factors that cause the cold humor; contextual effect and processing effort, the two elements to assess the degree of relevance, are balanced since the additional effort made by the addressee is repaid with a better contextual effect and pleasure. Accordingly, cold jokes are more likely to be appreciated in spite of that fact that it is sometimes puzzled for people to comprehend cold jokes. In terms of the analyses above, it is concluded that there is no essential distinction between cold joke and ordinary joke from the perspective of RT.

For the limited time, only some classical cold jokes borrowed from the Internet are taken into account. Consequently, the analysis is not complete and overall. Meanwhile, maybe some other linguistic theories are also suitable such as conversational principle, theories about context, background and foreground. The research of cold jokes is full of fun and pleasure. But there is still no complete and authoritative definition about it. Whether the cold humorous effect achieved by the effort is stronger or weaker than that of humorous effect in ordinary jokes? What is the criterion? These questions are remained to be solved in the future.

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