

# A Contrastive Analysis of Chinese Humor and English Humor in Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract**—Humor plays an important role in daily life and also quite useful in interpersonal communication. Nowadays, the cross-cultural communication between the English-speaking countries and China becomes more and more frequent while some humor is difficult to appreciate with diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, this paper aims at analyzing the Chinese and English humor from their similarities, like the use of ambiguity and figure of speech, as well as differences, especially in functions, topics and ways of expression. Related causes are further discussed the differences. Hopefully, the findings will help to reduce the obstacles in understanding humor in different culture and promote transcultural communication in a delightful manner.

**Index Terms**—Chinese humor, English humor, similarities, differences, causes

## I. INTRODUCTION

As a significant part of language and culture, humor has penetrated into nearly every aspect of our life and made a profound influence on interpersonal relationship. On one hand, humor can present people's views and attitudes towards life. On the other hand, humor can bring encouragement and consolation in difficult conditions. With the development of globalization, people are more inclined to use some humorous words to promote the cross-cultural communication, a good way to break the ice and establish a relaxed environment between each other. However, if not used appropriately, some humor may even lead to misunderstandings for the two sides.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The word "humor" is derived from the Latin word "humor", which means fluid or damp originally. The word "humor" has not been translated into Chinese until 1930s by Lin Yutang. There are more than one version of humor's definition. To read them through, it can be inferred that humor is something funny or laughable. As for the classifications of humor, scholars hold different points of view. Among the different classifications, according to Bergson, he classified humor into situational humor and linguistic humor. Situational humor is also called situation-dependent humor which takes place in specific conditions and includes laughable behaviors. The representative forms are the pantomime or cartoon. Linguistic humor is mainly expressed with the use of words, e.g., jokes or some humorous stories (Bergson, 1980). Linguistic humor is the focus of this paper.

The scholars abroad mainly concentrate on the humor production mechanism, like the Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, Relief Theory, Cooperative Principle and some other linguistic theories. The researchers in China have studied the English humor from the perspective of pragmatics, cognitive linguistics and other discipline. Some researchers also compare the differences between humor in different cultural backgrounds from the perspective of intercultural communication, which is a new direction in the humor study (Qian, 2015).

Hence, in this paper, the Chinese and English humor will be contrasted by analyzing the similarities and differences in the two influencing languages, further the underlying factors will also be discussed to have a better understanding of the two kinds of humor.

## III. THE SIMILARITIES OF CHINESE HUMOR AND ENGLISH HUMOR

Since some humor can be appreciated internationally, it is crucial to first discuss the similarities of Chinese humor and English humor, especially in the use of ambiguity and figure of speech.

### A. Use of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is widely used as a way to produce a humorous effect both in English and Chinese humor because ambiguity can make a word or sentence understood more than one level of meaning. In this part, two kinds of ambiguity will be analyzed, including phonological ambiguity and lexical ambiguity.

#### 1. Phonological Ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity refers to a phenomenon that two unit words sound the same but have different spellings and meanings, for instance, "whether" and "weather", "not" and "knot". Phonological ambiguity is regarded as an important source of humor. Two examples from English and Chinese humor are presented:

Example 1:

One day, a chemistry teacher asked his students, "What is the chemical formula for water?"

A student answered proudly, "HIJK~O!"

Her teacher felt confused and asked, "What are you talking about?"

The student replied, "Yesterday you said the formula for water is H to O!" (Dong, 1995, p.12)

Analysis: In this English humor, a chemistry teacher asked the students a question about the chemical formula for water. As we all know, the answer is H<sup>2</sup>O. However, the pronunciation of "two" sounds the same with "to". One of the students considered the answer was just "H to O" and recited the alphabet from H to O, leading to the humorous effect.

Example 2:

有人在路边做问卷调查，问：“你幸福吗？”有的路人说幸福，有的人说不幸福。后来遇见一个农民，调查者问道：“你幸福吗？”农民无辜的说道：“俺姓王。” (Jiang, 2004, p.11)

Analysis: In this Chinese humor, someone makes a survey about whether people are happy with the present life at the roadside. However, a farmer gives an irrelevant answer, which is quite humorous. In Chinese, the expression "I'm happy" and "My surname is Fu" share the same units of pronunciation. Obviously the farmer mishears the question and the unexpected answer tickles the funny bone.

## 2. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity refers to a phenomenon that the understandings of one word or phrase are not the same in different people's eyes. With the development of the two languages, the meanings of words have changed a lot. The misunderstanding of the new meaning and old meaning can possibly form humor. Here are the examples created by lexical ambiguity from both English and Chinese humor.

Example 3:

Tom: Is your mother engaged?

Jim: Engaged? She has three children, you see! (Dong, 1995, p.16)

Analysis: In English, the word "engaged" means "busy" or "making an agreement to get married". Tom asks Jim whether his mother is busy or not. Obviously, Jim misunderstands what Tom wants to express, which is quite amusing.

Example 4:

妈妈：这么优秀的男孩子你不喜欢，那你要什么样的？

女儿：我要一个与我有着共同语言的。

妈妈：他又不是外国人，你们怎么会没有共同语言？(Jiang, 2004, p.19)

Analysis: In Chinese, "共同语言" originally means sharing the same language, gradually it refers to sharing the same hobbies or view points. In this joke, what the daughter expresses is to get married with a man who has the same interests and values with her. However, her mother pretends to misunderstand it as the original meaning to show her dissatisfaction in a witty way.

## B. Use of Figure of Speech

English humor bears another similarity to Chinese humor, that is, the technique of figure of speech applied in some jokes, including metaphor, hyperbole and rhyme and so on. If it is used properly, humor will be far more vivid and thought-provoking. The following part will analyze the employment of figure of speech in English and Chinese humor from three major aspects.

### 1. Metaphor

Metaphor refers to a figure of speech that implicitly compares two things which are unrelated but have common characteristics in some way. Naturally, metaphor is one main figure of speech employed in both English and Chinese humor. The following two examples are from English and Chinese humor respectively.

Example 5:

Everyone has a photographic memory. Some just don't have film. (Dong, 1995, p.51)

Analysis: In this English humor, human's memory is compared to a camera and the process of memorizing is like taking photos, which cannot be done without rolls of film. Therefore, the writer satirizes those people who are very forgetful and just act like a camera without films.

Example 6:

有些人写的文章就是婆娘的裹脚布，又长又臭。(Jiang, 2004, p.49)

Analysis: In this Chinese joke, the long yet meaningless articles are compared to the cloth which women use to wrap their feet in the old days in China. The use of metaphor vividly mocks those boring articles in a satiric manner.

### 2. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is a way to use exaggeration to create humorous effect. It can create a deep impression or evoke strong feelings. The following two examples will help to illustrate it clearly.

Example 7:

在世界第一瀑布前，导游对游客说：“如果女士们可以安静一点，我们就能听到瀑布的水声了。”(Jiang, 2004, p.45)

Analysis: In this joke, the guide exaggerates that the women's noise even goes beyond the huge sound of water to indicate that the tourists are very noisy. The use of hyperbole from the guide humorously displays his irritation.

Example 8:

A foreigner boasts to say: In my hometown, the millet grows up as big as the corn. Suddenly, he trips over a watermelon in the field. A farmer says as he laughs: Mind my grape!(Dong, 1995,p.47)

Analysis: In this English joke, the foreigner shows off his country's millet. Similarly, the farmer also exaggerates that his grape is as big as watermelon to satirize the nonnative in an interesting way.

### 3. Rhyme

Rhyme is a humorous way where the last word in one line has the similar sound as the last word in the next line to make fun. The followings are the two examples from Chinese and English humor.

Example 9:

儿子: 我站似一棵松。

母亲: 看你像根葱。(Jiang, 2004,p.33)

Analysis: In this Chinese humor, the two words “松” and “葱” share the same rhyme “ong”. The son thinks he has stood straightly like a pine while his mother makes fun of him by saying that he looks just like a scallion. The striking contrast makes the humorous effect.

Example 10:

My darling, my lover, my beautiful wife: marrying you has screwed up my life.(Dong, 1995,p.29)

Analysis: In English, the word “wife” sounds like the word “life”. From the seemingly love poem, we can see the husband subtly describes his unhappy marriage within two rhymed parts of sentences.

## IV. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH HUMOR AND CHINESE HUMOR

Compared with the similarities, the differences between English and Chinese humor are more obvious, especially in the perspectives of the function, the favored topic, the way of expression. Therefore, in the following section, these three aspects will be illustrated with some examples.

### A. Different Functions

“According to the different functions, humor can be divided into the critical humor, which is to satire some negative phenomena in life; the affirmative humor, which is to highlight some positive phenomena in life and the pure humor, only the interesting reflection on some trivial phenomena in life.” (Attardo, 1994,p.46)

Because the westerners are relatively more informal and open than Chinese, there is a large proportion of pure humor in their life. That's to say, they can make humorous jokes almost in any places and for anyone. However, China is influenced by traditional Confucian thought deeply. Chinese people lay emphasis on social education function of humor. It seems that some Chinese humor has a historical and social mission. Many such traditional crosstalks, short sketches and ironic jokes are widespread. One typical example is the short sketches of Zhao Benshan, a once national humorist, the subjects of whose works are selected from villages and peasants. Some of his works mock the unkind rich people, the wrongdoing officers and the poor people without ambition, which also make people laugh, but bitterly.

### B. Different Topics

Among many topics, one special but common topic is about sex in English humor. Due to the English-speaking countries' explicit culture, people are not ashamed of talking about sex. This kind of jokes can be easily found in TV. Meanwhile, people from English-speaking countries take an active part in political activities, so the jokes about politics are also popular. Another topic favored by English speakers is about religion. Since Christianity is the major religion in Western countries, the jokes of the Bible and Christianity can be read a lot in English humor. What's more, certain groups of people are often laughed at in western humor. The first group is the ethnic minorities, e.g. British people often mock the Scottish and Irish people, while Americans take the Black and Jews as targets. The second group is some professional people who have respectable jobs, like doctors and lawyers. The next group is those who are prone to fall into fixed images, like the Blonde and the redneck.

Example 11:

A: How do you know when Asians are moving into your neighborhood?

B: When the Mexicans start getting car insurance.

Analysis: This is an ethnic joke. Because in Americans' eyes, Asian people are stereotyped as bad drivers and Mexicans as impoverished. Hence, some stereotypes are often borrowed in such humor.

On the contrary, compared with English-speaking countries, Chinese people don't talk about sex jokes, which is considered immoral in Chinese implicit culture. Chinese people also regard politics as something serious, thus they rarely take politics as a topic of joke, especially in the formal situations. As for the religious jokes, buddhism and Taoism are prevalent in China, so the related gods and ghosts often occur in the jokes. On the other hand, due to the Chinese long agricultural economy, there are a lot of jokes taking the landlords and other rich men as the targets. Moreover, since China is a country with five thousand year, people also like to enjoy some jokes based on renowned

ancient people and famous events.

Example 12:

岳母对着岳飞慈祥地说道：儿啊，为娘想在你背上刺四个字让你不忘娘的教诲，你怕疼吗？岳飞说道：不怕！岳母泪眼婆娑地刺下四个大字：龘龘龘龘。” (Jiang, 2004, p.70)

Analysis: This humorous joke is adapted from an ancient Chinese story of Yue Fei, who is one of China's greatest generals. In the Song dynasty, Yue Fei's mother wanted his son to join the army and serve the country all his life, so she tattooed four Chinese characters “精忠报国” on the back of her son. Obviously, in this joke, the original characters are replaced by another four characters that have many more strokes, which undoubtedly would make Xue Fei feel more painful, producing humorous effect for readers.

### C. *Different Ways of Humor Expression*

Chinese and American People adopt quite different verbal communication styles. Americans tend to follow open and direct communication style because they think people should reveal true intentions, wants, opinions with precise words and in a straightforward manner. As a result, in the humor expression, the real events and even sometimes the real names are often used rather than something that are made up. Therefore, some English humor read much sharper and more unfriendly than Chinese humor.

Example 13:

President Clinton sees one of his assistant approaches him anxiously.

The president says "What is it?"

"It's the Abortion Bill, Mr. President. How do you want to deal with it?" the assistant asks.

"Just go ahead and pay it." the President replies. (Lv, 2008,p.8)

Analysis: In this English humor, when the assistant mentioned the Abortion Bill, the president Clinton thought it was the bill for the abortion of his mistress, which is the satire of the sex scandal of this president.

On the contrary, Chinese people don't always state explicitly what they want to say and what they really mean. Instead, they are more likely to imply what they think with ambiguous words, because in Chinese culture, people incline to avoid direct confrontation, they prefer to use the indirect irony of others in humor expression, for instance, they will make fun of the superior's mistake in a mild way. Similarly, a made-up name or plot rather than the real name or event is used to reach the humorous effect.

Example 14:

某人房屋漏雨，屡次请求修缮，无人答复。一日，领导来视察，问及房子的情况，此人答道：还好，平时不会漏雨，只有下雨天才漏。次日，修屋顶的人来了。(Jiang, 2004,p.73)

Analysis: In this joke, Chinese humor's indirectness can be clearly demonstrated from the man's humorous words that his roof only leaked on the rainy days, which satirizes the workers' inefficiency in an indirect way. Besides, no real names are mentioned in the joke.

## V. SOME CAUSES OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH HUMOR AND CHINESE HUMOR

As discussed before, English humor varies from Chinese humor in more aspects. It is not enough to simply touch on the differences and the underlying causes also need to be analyzed, including a variety of cultural values, history and geography and religious beliefs.

### A. *Cultural Value*

Cultural values are learned as rules or principles upon which the society exists. Understanding the different cultural values can help to appreciate the humor differences. In western countries, individualism is the essence of their culture. It holds that a person is supposed to think or judge independently and possesses his goals, needs and desires. They are taught to consider themselves as individuals who have to take responsibilities for themselves. Therefore, English speakers are always assertive in communicating with others and express their views and feelings directly. As a result, the English humor is more direct, and even aggressive, also there are more topics covered in their humor.

Chinese people think highly of collectivism, which is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. It emphasizes the benefit and the need of the group rather than the individual. In such culture, people always express their views and feelings with great caution. Reflected in Chinese humor, indirectness is the primary feature of it, in other words, the humor should target at certain people with an appropriate purpose in a restricted way.

### B. *History and Geography*

Different histories shape the distinctive cultures. China is a country with a recorded history of more than 5000 years, so it is common for Chinese to tell some ancient jokes. On the other hand, influenced by the long history, people have great respect for the Emperor and others in high positions, so it's not polite to make fun of them. As for the English-speaking countries, for example, America went through a hard struggle to win its independence, therefore, in their humor, equal relationship is more embodied, even the scandal of the president can be a joke.

As for the geography, Chinese civilization is originated from the Yellow River, where the ancient Chinese made a

living on agriculture, so Chinese are more conservative and mild in their humor expression. On the contrary, most of the English-speaking countries started their journey near the ocean. The long-term adventure at sea makes the people open-minded and active. Consequently, compared with Chinese humor, English humor is more explicit and even violent.

### C. Religious Belief

Religion, as an important part of culture, is a system of worship. The religious belief exerts a great effect on people's communication style. It is also the factor leading to humor differences between China and western countries.

Christianity is the major or even the dominant religion in western countries. According to the Bible, people are born with original sin which is inherited from Adam and Eve. It is believed that natural desires are the instincts of human beings. So in English humor, people are not ashamed to tell sexual jokes. Also, Christianity puts a high value on equality and freedom for it holds that all human beings are God's children, which causes the equal joking relation. Christianity and Bible are always become the topics in English humor.

In China, there is no dominant religion like Christianity worshiped by English-speaking countries. There are four parallel religions in Chinese history: Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism and Taoism. Among the four religions, Confucianism is the most influential. The core of Confucianism is humanism and harmony, thus Chinese humor is indirect and the joking relation is strict.

### D. Thinking Pattern

Chinese and English speakers have adopted diversified communication styles, which are also reflected in humor expression. Essentially, these differences are also affected by different thinking patterns.

The linear thinking pattern is engraved on English speakers' minds while the spiral one is in Chinese'. Western people think that a cause leads to an effect, however, in Chinese culture, a cause can lead to an effect and it can be an effect as well. Therefore, the conception of wholeness and integration is highlighted in Chinese culture. Consequently, some Chinese humor pursues the pleasure in searching the laughing points step by step, embodied typically in Chinese traditional cross-talks, which hold the audience in suspense from the beginning to the end. That's why patience is needed in enjoying some Chinese humor.

## VI. CONCLUSION

As the saying goes, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Therefore, to appreciate even use the target cultural humor, it is supposed to first try to learn the related culture as much as possible. Thus, a comparative study on Chinese and English is fairly necessary: the similarities of Chinese and English humor lie in the same techniques like ambiguity and figure of speech and the differences include various functions, topics, and ways of expression studied in this paper. To have a deep understanding of the humor differences, the hidden cause is another factor to learn.

Since humor is complicated, the present study is far from adequacy in researching the similarities and differences between the two kinds of humor. The causes are not analyzed profoundly enough, either. More comparative studies can be made in the future.

However, considering the risk of offending others in other culture in the jokes is great, the humor use still needs extremely caution in the cross-cultural communication.

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