

Verbal Humor in Stand-up Comedy “Rock & Roast” with the GTVH Theory

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Abstract. The General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH) has been a significant pragmatics theory since Attardo and Raskin put it forward in 1991. Six knowledge resources (KR) are included in GTVH: script oppositions (SO), logical mechanisms (LM), situations (SI), targets (TA), narrative strategies (NS), and language (LA) to analyze verbal humor. As a comedic performance on stage, stand-up comedies have experienced explosive popularity in China in recent years. This paper extracted four excerpts from the final round of a stand-up comedy TV show “Rock & Roast” Series 5 and applies qualitative research to analyze them with the theory of GTVH. From the analysis, different KRs of SI and TA showed up to give the audience several interesting contents. In the SO KR, from the most to lowest abstract level are all used in the script. At the same time, LM, NS and LA KRs as tools serve for the contents. It is obvious that LM varies among these excerpts, but NS are usually the same and LA can be absent in the performances. The straightforward content KRs of SI and TA are more obvious, LM, but NS and LA are sometimes unnoticed, which are essential tools to make the text effective. It suggests the feasibility of combining Chinese stand-up comedy with pragmatics theory and it extends the traditional studies in this field.

Keywords: GTVH; pragmatics; stand-up comedy; cooperative principle.

1. Introduction

Humor is an indispensable part in daily communication, and humorous language can relieve contradictions, create a pleasant atmosphere, and build a friendly interpersonal relationship. The study of humor dates to the time of ancient Greek and Roman philosophies, including Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian for their three motivational theories [1].

Among all those philosophical theories of humor, the most widely accepted one is the incongruity theory, which got its start in an offhand remark of Aristotle [2]. According to this theory, humor is explained as humorous amusement, and “amusement” is considered as the enjoyment of incongruity [2]. Furthermore, the definition of incongruity was more detailed according to Beattie [3] that Laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage, or as acquiring a sort of mutual relation from the peculiar manner in which the mind takes notice of them. Based on the theory of incongruity, incongruity-resolution model extended to combine the initial incongruity and further resolve together to create humor [4]. However, the research of humor from linguistic perspective only evolved from 1970s among various fields such as philosophy, psychology, and anthropology [5].

The Semantic Script Theory of Humor (SSTH) was the first application of a modern linguistic theory to study verbal humor in semantics [6]. To the purpose of revising and extending, Raskin combined his SSTH theory with Attardo’s five-level joke representation model. Then the general theory of verbal humor (GTVH) was born [7]. In this theory, six knowledge resources (KR) are involved and they share a hierarchical organization. When the level is lower, the KR is more concrete and the ability of humor generation is weaker, so that the similarity of humor is higher. On the contrary, the higher level means that the KR is more abstract, the similarity of humors is less. From low to high level, they are: 1): Language (LA), refers to all the verbalization and other linguistic components at all levels of the text; 2): Narrative Strategies (NS), which means that any joke has to be presented in a form of narrative organization, such as simple narrative, dialogue and conversation; 3): Target (TA). This KR accounts for the person or groups that the joke is aiming to ridicule or attack; 4): Situation (SI), which provides some ‘props’ for the joke, such as the objects, participants

and activities; 5): Logical Mechanism (LM) stands for the way in which the two scripts in the joke are come together, such as false analogy, juxtapositions and garden path; 6): Script Opposition (SO), which is based on the script opposition/overlapping of Raskin's SSTH. The opposed two scripts in a joke make the hearer find the ambiguous point and realize an alternative interpretation from the beginning.

Meanwhile, the cooperative principle is a significant concept in pragmatics [8]. There are four maxims to constitute an effective and cooperative communication: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. It is pointed out that the violation of maxims of Cooperative Principle could cause humorous effects [9].

Stand-up Comedy as an art form and it is believed to have developed from comic lecturers like Mark Twain and it became a populist entertainment in vaudeville in the early decades of the 20th century [10]. There are differences in the understanding of stand-up comedy between China and the West. As stand-up comedy has a longer history of development in the West, its industrial chain is more mature. However, stand-up comedy in China started late and it was mainly based on TV shows. 'Rock & Roast' is a competition-style online TV show launched on Tencent Video in 2017 and is a representative of stand-up TV shows in recent years with good market reputation and popularity. Due to its competition nature, the TV show are available for participants from all walks of like. The different voices of the same topic from those participants correspond to the current preferences to diversity and demonstrate the up-to-date issues of the society.

According to Attardo [11], the GTVH is ideally capable of including all humorous texts of any length. As an art form, stand-up comedy is often composed of related humorous fragments, which can be short or long. The study subject of this paper is a Chinese TV Show 'Rock & Roast' Series 5. In this show, each participant is required to perform for about five minutes according to the theme of the episode. GTVH can provide a theoretical perspective to analyze the fragments of text, broadening the field of pragmatics in Chinese humor. Previous research has included little research on the use of GTVH in Chinese and oral humor is seldom mentioned. Therefore, this paper would fill the gap of the research by analyzing the oral humor which is popular and up-to-date. Moreover, stand-up comedy performances have strong time and regional constraints. By analyzing the humorous text, it is better to grasp the current trends and social topics. This paper will use qualitative methods with GTVH theory to analyze three excerpts in the first round of the TV Show competition, and the six parameters of GTVH involved in four performances will be analyzed.

2. Methodology

This study is based on the texts from three participants in the first round of Season 5 of "Rock & Roast" TV Show. Since the Season 5 was broadcast, it has gained a lot of popularity. According to Lighthouse Professional Edition, the show has now achieved the top of market share of the main film broadcast on the network seven times, with the highest historical broadcast market share reaching 22.75%. According to Weibo data, the cumulative number of views of the topic "Rock & Roast" has exceeded 15 billion, and every time a new episode is broadcast, topics related to the Show will appear on the top search list [12].

The topic of this round is 'I wish you have fun for more than 5 minutes. As the slogan of the TV Show is "Everyone Can talk 5 Minutes Stand-Up", and each participant performs for 5 minutes, this topic reflects the TV Show's advocacy of a positive and optimistic attitude toward life. The Qualitative methods will be used to analyze and interpret excerpts of the text of the four participants from six KRs using the GTVH model. As an influential and popular TV program, the analysis of its texts plays an important role in social discussion and value orientation.

3. Text Analysis

3.1 Excerpt 1

People say children are carefree, but I wasn't content when I was a child. Since I've never been rebellious, my most rebellious behavior is to discuss with my mom how rebellious other kids are.

My most rebellious thought was whether it was possible to get a tattoo but not be discovered by parents. Is there that flesh-colored tattoo, or a mosquito bite shape tattooed on the arm. In winter, people ask, are there mosquitoes in this season? I said, no, this is my tattoo.

I thought about whether I could discuss with the tattooist, that is, I give you money, you give me a tattoo, but tattoo yourself. Then when I want to show off with my classmates, you come over.

Table 1. GTVH Analysis of Excerpt 1

KR	
SO	rebellious/obedient
LM	figure-ground
SI	get a tattoo
TA	her characteristic of obedient
NS	description and dialogue
LA	<i>irrelevant</i>

This is an excerpt of Niaoniao, who got the highest score in the first round. As shown in table 1, the script's oppositeness is rebellious and obedient. It shows that even the most rebellious action of Niaoniao is actually obedient. It implies that she is just a girl who pretends to be cool by making some popular actions when she is a kid.

The situation is the thought of getting a tattoo. The process of getting a tattoo is painful so the kids who have tattoo are considered as brave and rebellious. And the target is herself with the focus on the characteristic of obedient. As she introduces herself in previous sentences, the audience already know this characteristic so they can relate with it. Niaoniao talks about her thought about having a tattoo to be regarded as rebellious. The Logical Mechanism used in this excerpt is figure-ground reversal. The function of tattoo is usually supposed to be conspicuous and special, but it is reversed by requiring it with flesh-colored to make it invisible or even paint it on the tattooist himself. Although the action of tattoo is accomplished, on the contrary, it shows that Niaoniao is timid and obedient.

Besides, the narrative strategy is description and dialogue. Niaoniao delivers her innocent thoughts of getting a tattoo and descriptive reasons in her childhood. Meanwhile, her imaginary dialogue with other people is also included. This dialogue supports the motivation of Niaoniao wanting a tattoo is just showing off to her friends.

3.2 Excerpt 2

I once watched a crime film, and there was a self-heating hot pot sponsorship. The policemen stay up late every day and eat the self-heating hot pot. I thought that they must get extra internal heat. Later, I found out that worried too much, the herbal tea also came to sponsor.

Their self-heating hot pot is really powerful. No matter who is eating or in which direction, the logo is facing me directly.

The criminal 391st he same. Every day they have a dangerous and risky life, while they also eat self-heating hot pot back home. I mean bro, if this is what you pursue, don't break the law or whatever, just surrender since the police have enough hot pot in the office.

Table 2. GTVH Analysis of Excerpt 2

KR	
SO	luxurious/simple
LM	Missing link
SI	Food for criminals
TA	ads in the film
NS	Description
LA	<i>irrelevant</i>

This text is extracted from Qiu Rui. Referring to table 2, the script oppositeness is luxurious and simple. And the logical mechanism used is missing link. He inferred that the criminals are taking so much risk just to have self-heating food, which is less than \$10. In fact, the audience knows that such an inference is absurd, those criminals trying to do bad things not just to have a self-heating hot pot. This logical chain is incomplete to make his utterance sarcasm. This is used to illustrate the irrationality of advertising implanted in the plot of the film. The situation is the food for criminals. In the common sense of the audience, criminals' food should be of high quality, which supposed be the results of Qiu Rui 's 'dangerous and risky life'. However, in the plot of the film, the criminal's food is also sponsored hot pot, just worth \$10 or so. It is obvious that the target is the ads in the film. And the Narrative Strategy used is description, which describes the irrationality and excessiveness of advertisements in films.

3.3 Excerpt 3

Every year in July of the lunar calendar, we come to catch up to the stand-up marketplace. We had Mao Dou (edamame), Dan Juan (egg rolls), Nan Gua (pumpkins), and Rou Shi (meat), Niao Niao (birds) over there. There are two more who seem to sincerely come to the market, Wei Daye (Uncle Wei) and Huand Dama (Aunt Huang).

You have to shout to the crowd before you speak. "Come and watch the fresh stand-up comedy, the stand-up just written. Take a look."

In fact, our slogan which is that everyone can set up a stall for five minutes. You would think it's the slogan of the city inspectors.

Table 3. GTVH Analysis of Excerpt 3

KR	
SO	actual/nonactual
LM	false analogy
SI	"Rock & Roast" TV Show
TA	"Rock & Roast" TV Show
NS	Description
LA	Maxim of manner violation

As shown in table 3, Hu Lan uses actual/nonactual as script oppositeness in this excerpt, which is the most abstract level in SSTH model. In Chinese folk customs, come up to the marketplace refers to the form of commodity trading activities in which people in a region gather regularly to carry out commodity trading activities. Hu Lan draws an analogy between the catch-up experience he previously mentions and participating in this TV show. This is the contrast between actual and nonactual. The Logical Mechanism used here is false analogy. He listed several names of participants, such as those who used food as their names, such as edamame, egg rolls and pumpkins, as well as Uncle Wei and Aunt Huang, which are related to the common images of middle-aged and elderly people in the market. So here he also violates the maxim of manner as a Language KR. In addition, under the logic of false analogy, he extended the show's slogan "Everyone can talk 5-minute of stand-

up" to "Everyone can set up a 5-minute stall", which further strengthened the connection between analogies.

Both his Situation and Target are "Rock & Roast" TV Shows, and he commented and explained this TV Show in a new perspective. The Narrative Strategy is description, which directly describes the connection between the marketplace and the TV Show.

3.4 Excerpt 4

When I was a child, I had 2 dreams, the first was to be an astronaut, and the second was to be the owner of a shop. Because after you just fascinated in Mars, Saturn and Venus in class, and which one has heavier gravity, you find that the biggest 'gravity' is still the shop at school. Little scientists, little astronauts, are all attracted in it. The little astronomer said that the spicy stripes are too spicy to make me see stars.

Table 4. GTVH Analysis of Excerpt 4

KR	
SO	actual/nonactual
LM	juxtaposition
SI	Children buy snacks at the shop
TA	dream of children
NS	Description
LA	Maxim of manner violation

This excerpt is extracted from He Guangzhi. As shown in table 4, he talks about his own and his classmates' dreams when they were children. Referring to table 4, the Logical Mechanism is juxtaposition. He uses the word 'gravity' to relate dreams and the shop so the Script Oppositeness is actual/nonactual. The 'gravity' in Chinese means natural phenomenon in universe and also means the attraction from one side. Children buying snacks at the shop in school is the situation and target are dreams of children in this excerpt, every child likes buying snacks in the shop no matter whatever dream they have. He uses description as narrative strategy to illustrate children's abundant dreams. Maxim of manner is violated as 'gravity' is not explained clearly and causes ambiguity.

3.5 Discussion

It can be found that GTVH theory is also applied in the language of Chinese and in the form of oral. Through the analysis of these six KR's, the humorous components of a stand-up text clip can be distinguished. Revolving around the topic of 'Wish you happy more than 5 minutes', different KR's of SI and TA showed up to give the audience many interesting contents. In the SO KR, from the most to lowest abstract level are all used in the script. At the same time, LM, NS and LA KR's as tools serve for the contents. It is obvious that LM varies among these excerpts, but NS are usually the same and LA can be absent in the performances.

Usually the audience will notice the straightforward content KR of SI and TA, LM, NS and LA are generally unnoticed, but those are essential tools to make the text effective and complete. There is always an indispensable target in stand-up for teasing or 'attacking', but participants accomplish it in a more subtle and acceptable way by fully exploiting all the six KR's, avoiding making utterances seem aggressive and unfriendly.

4. Conclusion

This paper analyzes a popular stand-up comedy TV Show in China according to GTVH model. As a result, it suggests the feasibility of combining Chinese stand-up comedy with pragmatics theory and it extends the traditional studies in this field. Stand-up started late in China, and it has broad prospects for future development. Through the analysis of the text, it is helpful to reveal the linguistic

characteristics and pragmatic strategies of stand-up comedy, and further explore the application of stand-up techniques. At the same time, as a form of oral language, the study of stand-up comedy can also help people improve their communication skills in daily life and choose suitable language strategies to achieve communication goals.

However, this model is only applicable for analyzing text, and there are other elements in stand-up to cause laughter that are not included, such as gesture, intonation and movements. Besides, only the texts were analyzed, not the humorous effects they produced. For example, the differences of results for the existence or order of each KR. Nevertheless, it is hard to measure due to live recording. Although the laughter of the audience can represent part of it, other factors such as the personalities of participants and the show editing will also have an influence on it.

As a mature theoretical model, the analysis of humorous texts is not limited to narrative texts but also to conversational texts involving more than one person, with a broader object of analysis. The study of humor has a long history, and its research involves many interdisciplinary fields, such as psychology, anthropology, and cognition. This paper only selects a landmark theory in linguistics, and the analysis of other perspectives still needs to be explored.

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