

An Analysis of English Verbal Humor Based on Language Memes

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Abstract

Memetics introduces information replication to the language analysis and discusses the origin, replication, variation and usage of language. Based on memetics this paper will explore English verbal humor. First, the article explains the phenomenon of language memes. Then it discusses the trigger force, manifestation of verbal humor. Finally, it studies the functions of verbal humor.

Keywords: verbal humor, language memes, replication, trigger force

1. Introduction

Memetics is a new theory that is based on Darwin's evolution theory and it interprets the law of cultural evolution. Language meme is the unit of culture spreading, which reveals the rule of discourse and language's transmission. Humor is the essence of language, is a reflection of perfect combination of human wisdom and language art. It is both common and special. Its universality lies in the fact that humorous words are almost everywhere and its speciality lies in the fact that its unique comedy effects come from changes of language and have attracted many scholars to study it from the perspectives of rhetoric and pragmatics. Based on memetics this paper will explain the phenomenon of language memes and explore English verbal humor from its trigger force, manifestation and functions in order to push the study of it.

2. Language Memetics

"Meme" was first put forward by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, and it was used to expound the law of cultural evolution. He thought that many human behaviors (concept, culture, etc.) could pass between the "hosts" by "replicator" similar to genes; therefore they are replicated, spread and evolved. Language is one of the cultural carriers. Words, phrases, sentences, discourse of the language can replicate, spread in order to realize the human verbal communication and culture dissemination. Therefore, language is a kind of meme. Language memes have relative stability and variability. Normativity and grammar are relatively stable while in pragmatics, speakers sometimes intentionally break the language norms according to the need of context and expression, leading to linguistic variation. The replication and spread of language memes have their own ways. He (2005) divided it into two types: memetic genotype and memetic phenotype. These features of language memes are consistent with the pragmatic features of verbal humor because in terms of pragmatic strategies, verbal humor is produced intentionally through combination of changes and innovation of language elements within a certain condition. Therefore, language memes have trigger force to verbal humor.

3. Trigger Mechanism of Verbal Humors

There are two types of verbal humors, memetic genotype and memetic phenotype. Memetic genotype refers to information in brains are replicated and transmitted directly. Although the forms of information may be varied in the process of replicating and transmitting, the meanings of original information will not be influenced by the variations. Memetic phenotype is the same forms of information which are filled with different contents and are spread and transmitted laterally. The difference between the two types of the language meme is: the former means the information coded in language memes, while the latter means the cognitive and behavioral effects caused by language memes on people.

3.1 Same Information Transmitted Directly

It means that original content is directly used in different context. In English there are phenomenon that language memes are transplanted into the new linguistic context and humor is sparked as a result of discordance resulted

from the direct transplant of the language memes to the new linguistic context. For example,

Teacher: Remember this motto, give others more and leave for yourself less.

Jack: It's my father's motto.

Teacher: How noble your father's quality is, what his occupation is?

Jack: He is a boxer.

"To give others more and leave for yourself less" is motto, which tells people to be selfless, generous, considerate to others, give more to others and leave less to ourselves. When Jack copies the sentence memes to describe his father's career, the motto is in contrast to the professional characteristics in the new context, which makes people laugh.

3.2 Same Information Transmitted in Various Forms

It means that the same information is transmitted in different form. That is to say, although the form of information may be varied in the process of replication and transmission, the original meaning will not be changed. There are many such humors in English, for example, "domestic engineer" and "housewife", "dead president" and "American dollars".

The above humors are caused by the incongruity resulting from the analogy and contrast between the original memes and new language memes.

3.3 Generation of Verbal Humors Affected by Phenotype

It means that same form of information that is filled with different content is transmitted laterally. This kind of verbal humors can be divided into three parts.

1) Homophone: language meme is transmitted by the same or similar pronunciation with the same structure. For example,

A man sits down at a restaurant and looks at the menu. He tells the waiter: "I think I will have the turtle soup." The waiter leaves, but the man changes his mind to pea soup. He yells to the waiter: "hold the turtle, make it pea."

"Pea" and "pee" are homophones. After ordering the meals, the guest changes his idea and he wants to change "turtle" to "pea", so he yelled in a hurry: "hold the turtle, make it pea", (Don't kill turtle, I want pea instead of turtle.) However in such a circumstance it may be mistaken for "hold the turtle, make it pee".

2) Homograph: the structure keeps the same but the content is replaced by some different others. For example,

A lawyer said: "I can't bear a fool! A farmer responded: your mother could!

"Bear" has several meanings. It has the meaning "stand" and "be pregnant". The lawyer insults the farmer and says to him that he is a fool, but the farmer uses "your mother could bear" to return stroke and satirize the lawyer because the word "bear" would remind the lawyer of "bear (pregnant)". We can see that forms of old language memes are not changed, but in the course of replicating and spreading, they are altered in the new context, producing new associative meaning.

3) Structural homonymy: both the form and content are applied directly in different contexts to generate some associating meaning. For example,

One of the questions in the Christmas exam was what caused a depression, a student wrote: "God knows, I don't know, Merry Christmas!" The exam paper came back with the teacher's notations: God gets 100, you get zero, happy new year!

In this example, the student is not able to work out the problem in the exam, therefore he leaves the message on the paper: "God knows, I don't know, Merry Christmas!" while the intelligent teacher writes down the comment: "God gets 100, you get zero, happy new year!"

4. Manifestation of Verbal Humor

Language memes in English verbal humor can be analyzed from the level of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar.

4.1 Verbal Humor in Pronunciation

Verbal humor produced by language meme could be understood by ambiguity in phonetics. Phonetic ambiguity includes three cases: complete homonymy, partial homonymy and false homonymy. Complete homonymy means a word has different part of speech and different meanings. For example, "fly (v. move through the air)" and "fly (n. a small flying insect with two wings). Partial homonymy consists of two cases; one is homophone, which

means two words have the same pronunciation but different meanings and spellings, for example, “see (v. notice something with your eyes)” and “sea (n. the salty water that covers much of the Earth’s surface)”. The other is homograph; two words have the same spelling but different meanings and pronunciations. For example, “tear (v. make irregular holes in cloth or paper, or to pull material apart leaving irregular edges)” and tear (n. a drop of salty liquid that runs from your eye and when you are unhappy or in pain). False homonymy means the words have similar pronunciation, but different meanings and spellings.

“Pardon me for a moment, please,” said the dentist to the victim, “but before beginning this work I must have my drill.”

“Good heavens, man!” exclaimed the patient irritably. “Can’t you pull tooth without a rehearsal?” (Lv, 1990, p. 15)

The word “drill” which the dentist means is “a tool for making holes”. However the word “drill” which the patient gets is “practice”. Through spread process, two homonyms make the patient misunderstanding, thus the humor occurs.

When the waitress in a New York City restaurant brought an Englishman the soup du jour, the Englishman was a bit dismayed. “Good heavens,” he said, “what is this?” Waitress said: “Why, it’s bean soup, sir.” “I don’t care what it has been,” the man sputtered. “What is it now?” (Wang & Liu, 2011, p. 48)

The pronunciations of word “bean” and “been” are the same. The Englishman was unsatisfied with the soup. So when the waitress told him the soup is bean soup, he deliberately says that “I don’t care what it has been.” And goes on to ask what the soup is to express his dissatisfaction about the soup in a euphemistic way. Thus the effect of verbal humor occurs.

A pair of newly-weds went to Niagara Falls on their honeymoon. “There,” said the husband, pointing to the magnificent falls, “I told you that if you married me, I’d show you the world’s biggest cataract.” “Cataract?” shrieked the former chorus girl. “I thought you said Cadillac” (Lv, 1990, p. 25)

4.2 Verbal Humor in Vocabulary

Language meme in English verbal humor is caused by the changes happens on words.

Hopeless widow: “Nothing can mend my broken heart.”

Hopeful widower: “Except re-pairing.” (Lv, 1990, p. 17)

“Widow” is “a woman whose husband has died” and “widower” is “a man whose wife has died”. The widower imitates and replaces “mending” into “repairing”. And “re-pairing” has the same pronunciation and similar forms with “repairing”. The widower’s skill words indicate that he wants to remarry the widow in a humorous way.

“Cognac? Whiskey? Liqueurs? Cigarettes?” the customs inspector asked the tourist just off the plane. “That’s very nice of you,” said the tourist, “Just make mine black coffee.” (Lv, 1990, p. 179)

Cognac is a brand of brandy in France. “Cognac”, “Whiskey”, “Liqueur”, and “Cigarette” refer to four kinds of items need to be taxed respectively. The inspector asks the tourist if he takes the four kinds of goods, but the tourist misunderstands that if he wants to have some drink or a piece of cigarette, and answers that just coffee is OK. The humor is made.

The librarian went over to a small, noisy boy. “Please be quiet!” she warned. “People in the library can’t read.” “They can’t?” the boy asked curiously. “Then what are they doing there?” (Qing, 2011, p. 7)

The librarian tells the small boy that people are not allowed to read in the library, but the boy misunderstood the librarian’s meaning into “not be able to”.

“My father’s eighty years old and never uses glasses.”

“I notice that he prefers to drink out of a bottle.” (Lv, 1990, p. 30)

The word “glass” can mean both “a small container which you drink from” and “two pieces of glass in a frame worn in front of your eyes to help you to see better”. One man says that his father’s sight is very good although he is eighty years old. But his friend misunderstands that his father prefers to drink directly without using glass. Thus the humor occurs.

4.3 Verbal Humor in Grammar

Compared with phonetics and vocabulary, the application of grammar is more stable. Language meme in English verbal humor manifested in grammar can be analyzed from the aspect of idioms, proverbs, apothegms, phrases, fixed collocation, sentence meaning and structures etc.

Teacher: When was Rome built?

Tom: At night.

Teacher: Who told you so?

Tom: You did. You said Rome was not built in a day! (Qiu & Wang, 2004, p. 5)

“Rome was not built in a day.” is a proverb which means nothing can be done easily and quickly. But Tom misunderstands his teacher’s words tactfully as Rome was built at night, not in a daytime, because he doesn’t know the answer.

Mother: A doctor is pursuing our daughter, but I don’t like the doctor.

Father: Feed her an apple a day. (Lv, 1990, p. 63)

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away” is an idiom which means eating apples may make people healthy. The father just copies and imitates the literal meaning of the idiom, which means giving their daughter an apple a day will protect the doctor from her.

“I have changed my mind.”

“Thank Heaven! Does it work any better now?” (Lv, 1990, p. 66)

A tells B that he has changed her ideas, but B intentionally copies and transmits the literal meaning of “change one’s mind” as A has replaced his own mind with a new one to makes a joke with A.

A lady brought her son a bicycle and was watching proudly as he rode around the block. On his first round he shouted: “Look, Mom, no hands!” The second time around: “Look, Mom, no feet!” At the third time: “Look, Mon, no teeth!” (Li, 2010, p. 249)

The son uses “no teeth” by replicating the same structure with “no hands” and “no feet” to tell his mother that he hurts himself and avoid criticizing.

A nervous taxpayer was unhappily conversing with the IRS Tax auditor who had come to review his records. At one point the auditor exclaimed, “Mr. Carelton, we feel it is a great privilege to be allowed to live and work in the USA. As a citizen you have an obligation to pay taxes, and we expect you to eagerly pay them with a smile. “Thanks goodness,” returned Mr. Carelton with giant grin on his face, “I thought you were gonging to want me pay with cash.” (Wang & Liu, 2011, p. 354)

The tax auditor tells the unwilling taxpayer that he should volunteered to pay tax happily. But the taxpayer deliberately copies and imitates the structure “pay with smile” as “pay with cash” to show his unwillingness.

5. Functions of English Verbal Humor

5.1 *Activating Atmosphere*

Laughter makes the atmosphere relaxing and makes boring life interesting. Verbal humor consisting of language memes can make people laugh and activate atmosphere. For example:

“I see your wife’s back from Florida.”

“I always knew she wore a low-neck gown, but never thought you could see her back from that distance. (Lv, 1990, p. 89)

According to the context, the speaker attempts to tell “I know your wife has returned from Florida”, while the hearer understands “see” as “look” and “back” as “the part of the human body that is on the opposite side to the chest”. The hearer’s copying and transmission of two words “see” and “back” increases the passage’s humor which activates atmosphere and relax people.

5.2 *Improving Interpersonal Communication*

The solution to conflict is necessary. If people can apply verbal humor properly, the conflict will be settled and the distance between people will be shortened. Thus, the personal relationship will be improved.

A sign in a shop window read: “Fishing Tickle”. Noticing the error, a customer asked: “Hasn’t anyone told you about it before?”

“Yes,” replied the dealer. “Many have dropped in to tell me, and they always buy something.” (Lv, 1990, p. 176)

6. Conclusion

From the analysis above, we can draw conclusion that we can use language memes to interpret verbal humor. Trigger mechanism of Verbal Humors is that according to the contexts and requirements of communication,

people intentionally in some ways to imitate or modify the old language memes, forming new memes variants. These meme variants can break harmony between language and its context or form a sharp contrast from the perspectives of words, discourse etc., stimulating unexpected, inappropriate even contradicting incongruity, in this way, side-splitting humor occurs. English verbal humor that shows language memes can be analyzed from three aspects: phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. Verbal humor has positive effects on our life. It can activate atmosphere and improve interpersonal communication.

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