

Study on Verbal Humor in Miao Fu and Wang Sheng's Crosstalk from the Perspective of Icm Theory

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ABSTRACT. *Crosstalk is a Chinese traditional art. Since its inception in the late Qing Dynasty, crosstalk has always been loved by Chinese people, and it has also attracted a large number of scholars to study. In the 1980s, with the rise of cognitive linguistics, Chinese linguists have also begun to analyze the verbal humor of crosstalk from a cognitive perspective. ICM Theory is an influential theories in cognitive linguistics, conceptual blending theory, relevance theory and other cognitive theories are applied in crosstalk research. This study analyzes the verbal humor in Miao Fu and Wang Sheng's crosstalk from the perspective of ICM theory and the reasons of its explanatory power.*

KEYWORDS: *Icm theory, Verbal humor, Crosstalk of miao fu and wang sheng*

1. Introduction

The notion of Idealized Cognitive Models was preceded by a theoretical exploration of the application of Gestalts in linguistics, namely in a new approach dubbed “experiential linguistics.” The basic claim of experiential linguistics, as Lakoff (1987) proposes, is that “a wide variety of experiential factors-perception, reasoning, the nature of the body, the emotions, memory, social structure, sensorimotor and cognitive development, etc.- determine in large measure, if not totally, universal structural characteristics of language.” Lakoff (1987) continues: “What I would ultimately like to show (or see other people show) is that thought, perception, the emotions, cognitive processing, motor activity, and language are all organized in terms of the same kinds of structures, which I am calling gestalts.” Generally, the more complex the description is, the more complex the concept is and the more difficult to be understood. But in a gestalt model, the situation is exactly the opposite. The components in the gestalt model may be cognitively more complex, but for the understanding of the entire Gestalt model, it is psychologically simpler.

This notion of Gestalts provided the underpinnings for the development of Idealized Cognitive Models (ICMs) in Cognitive Linguistics. ICMs are proposed as a way in which we organize knowledge, not as a direct reflection of an objective state of affairs in the world, but according to certain cognitive structuring principles. The models are idealized, in that they involve an abstraction, through perceptual and conceptual processes, from the complexities of the physical world. At the same time, these processes impart organizing structure-for example, in the form of conceptual categories. They provide an advantageous means of processing information because they are adapted to human neurobiology, human embodied experience, human actions and goals, and human social interaction.

Lakoff uses an English word “BACHELOR” to help illustrate the concepts of ICM. Linguists have made efforts on analyzing the word “bachelor” from the perspective of semantics. Traditionally linguists use [HUMAN], [MALE], [ADULT] and [NEVER MARRIED] as the semantic features of a bachelor. However, Fillmore (1982) points out that the word and the analysis of it hypothesizes a background knowledge-the person has expectations on marriage. Lakoff agrees with Fillmore and mentions that this word is defined in the basis of the world in which certain expectations hold, such as opposite-sex partnership, and this model is idealized in that it ignores many possible situations like same-sex partnership. Therefore the word “BACHELOR” is defined on the basis of an ICM. The above example shows that not all aspects of a concepts contributes to constitute an ICM, only some of them.

According to Lakoff, there are four types of ICMs: propositional structure, image-schematic structure, metaphorical mapping and metonymic mapping. Each type will be introduced in turn.

1.1 Propositional Structure

Propositional structures deal with entities, properties and their relations. The term “propositional” is used here to distinguish the ICMs composed by “imaginative devices (Lakoff, 1987)” like metaphor and metonymy. That’s to say, metaphor and metonymy are closely related with human imagination. Instead, propositional structures reflect the real world propositional and factual knowledge.

1.2 Image-Schematic Structure

Johnson (1987) characterizes an image schema as “a recurring, dynamic pattern of our perceptual interactions and motor programs that gives coherence and structure to our experience”. He believes that image schema provides frames for concepts. “He argues that our experience and concepts of SPACE are structured in large part by image schemas like CONTAINER, SOURCE-PATH-GOAL, PART-WHOLE, UP-DOWN, FRONT-BACK and so on. This means that image schemas like these structure our ICM (or mental model) for SPACE (Evans & Green, 2006).”

1.3 Metaphorical Mapping

Traditionally, metaphor is only regarded as one of part of speech. However, cognitive linguistics emphasize its cognitive function that it provides a new perspective to recognize and understanding the world. Metaphorical model refers to an image schema transformation that mappings the concept of one model or image schema (source concept) onto another (target concept). Metaphoric mapping provides an easier way for people to understand abstract concepts in terms of some familiar concrete concepts.

1.4 Metonymical Mapping

Metonymical mapping refers to an ICM which “contains relation(s) in which one thing stands for another” (Lakoff, 1987). We often use a stereotype person in a group to represent the entire group, which is actually an application of part-whole metonymy. For example, “Leifeng” is a kind and helpful person and we use his name to refer to those warmhearted people who always devote themselves to society.

2. Analysis on Verbal Humor in Miao Fu and Wang Sheng’s Crosstalk Based on Icm Theory

From the perspective of ICM, the realization of the humor in crosstalk is based on breaking the original ICM. The crosstalk performers proposed a certain concept, and the audience set up an ICM of the concept according to their encyclopedia knowledge. However, the performers won’t continue to perform according to the ICM preset by the audience, but proposed a new interpretation of this concept, that is, a new cognitive model (CM). At this time, the CM proposed by the performer conflicts with the ICM that the audience associates, and the humorous effect is produced immediately.

Four types of ICM are discussed in Lakoff’s book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*: propositional structure, image-schematic structure, metaphorical mappings and metonymical mappings. Since there is no case of metaphorical mappings and metonymical mappings are found in the Miao Fu and Wang Sheng’s crosstalk, here the author will only analyze the examples of propositional structure and image-schematic structure.

2.1 Analysis Based on Propositional Structure

Example 1:

Miao: Not to mention my family dormitory building, even my 470 square meter economically affordable house, I cannot drive my car in.

Wang: How big is your economically affordable house?!

Miao: Aah...

Wang: Your economically affordable house is 470 square meter?!

Miao: Vulgar, you are such vulgar!

(Selected from Miao and Wang’s crosstalk *This Is Not Mine*)

Example 1 is taken from Miao Fu and Wang Sheng’s crosstalk *Zhe Bu Shi Wo De* (This Is Not Mine). In this crosstalk, Miao plays a corrupt official who taking bribes like car and house. According to Miao, his friend built him a 470-metre-square economically affordable house. While ICM of economically affordable houses are indemnificatory houses provided by government for the low income families which are less than 60 square meters. The ICM of economically affordable house and the CM of Miao’s economically affordable house are presented as Figure 1 and Figure 2.

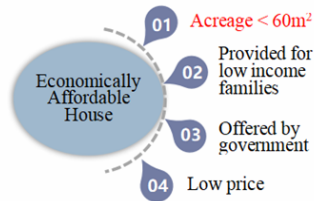


Fig.1 ICM of economically affordable house

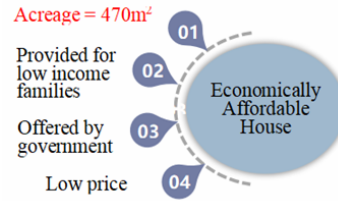


Fig.2 Miao’s CM of economically affordable house

Figure 1 shows the four attributes of an ICM of economically affordable housing: (1) acreage less than 60 square meters; (2) provided for low income families; (3) offered by government; (4) low price. While Figure 2 shows that in Miao’s CM of economically affordable housing, there are three attributes are accordant with the ICM, however the first and most important attribute, the acreage, is 470 square meters, which breaks the ICM of economically affordable housing. Therefore a conflict between the ICM of “economically affordable housing” and Miao’s CM of “economical affordable housing” arises, at the same time the humor is produced.

Example 2:

Miao: *Historical Records* is a work combining historical deeds and folklore.

Wang: It turns out that you have been educated.

Miao: Do you know the first chapter of *Historical Records*?

Wang: *Wu Di Ben Ji* (*The Five Emperors*).

Miao: Yep, the great Han Wu Di (First Emperor of Han Dynasty)...

Wang: Hold on, *The Five Emperors* records the deeds of the First Emperor of Han Dynasty?

Miao: huh...

Wang: It just ended at the beginning?

Miao: So you mean what it records?

Wang: The five emperors, ancient monarchs.

Miao: Oh I know, they are Zhuan Xu, Di ku, Yao, Shun and Yu.

Selected from *New Interpretations of Historical Records*

In this excerpt, Miao introduced the first chapter of the *Historical Records: The Five Emperors* which chronicles the stories of the emperors of the five tribal alliances in ancient times. The ICM of the five emperors are Zhuan Xu, Di Ku, Yao, Shun and Yu. But in Miao’s CM, *The Five Emperors* recorded the deeds of Emperor of Han Dynasty, because of the same pronunciation of “Wu Di (The Five Emperors)” and Han “Wu Di (Emperor of Han)”. The ICM of the five emperors and Miao’s CM are shown as Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4.



Fig.3 ICM of the Five Emperors

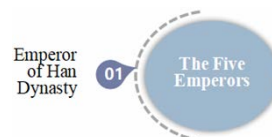


Fig.4 Miao’s CM of the Five emperors

As Figure 3 shows, the ICM of the five emperors are consist of Zhuan Xu, Di Ku, Yao, Shun and Yu. But in Figure 4, in Miao’s CM, the five emperors refer to Emperor of Han Dynasty. In this way, there is a deviation

between Miao's CM of the Five Emperors and the ICM of the Five Emperors, and the humorous effect is produced.

Example 3:

Miao: Teacher Wang received higher education and graduated from famous university. He is full of knowledge, we should learn from him.

Wang: nope... I still have to improve myself...

Miao: Not like you, since third grade in primary school, I took correspondence courses.

Wang: Oh God! Who would offer you correspondence course that time?!

(Selected from *An Encyclopedic Mind*)

In this cross talk, Miao praises Wang's erudition and thinks that he should learn from him. Miao mentions that he did not receive school education after the third grade, instead he took correspondence courses. However as is known to everyone, correspondence courses are higher education for adults, one cannot get correspondence courses in primary school. The ICM of correspondence courses and Miao's CM of correspondence courses can be shown as Figure 5 and Figure 6.



Fig.5 ICM of Correspondence Courses

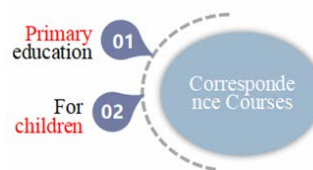


Fig.6 Miao's CM of Correspondence Courses

Figure 5 shows the two elementary attributes of correspondence courses: (1) higher education; (2) courses for adults. But according to Miao's description, he has taken correspondence courses since he was in grade three in primary school. That's to say, in Miao's CM, correspondence courses are primary education for children, as shown in Figure 6. His CM of correspondence courses is nothing with the ICM, and the courses he took were not correspondence courses at all. Thus the comic effect is emerged and the audience burst into laughter.

The above cases reflect the application of propositional structure in explaining the humorous language in crosstalk. The process of all the cases of to break propositional structures follow four steps: (1) the performer puts forward a concept; (2) an ICM of the concept formed in the audience's mind; (3) the performer explains the concept with a new interpretation, which is the performer's CM of the concept; (4) one or more attribute(s) in CM is/are not compatible with the contributes of ICM, the ICM is broken. Then the comic effect is created immediately.

2.2 Analysis Based on Propositional Structure

Example 4:

Miao: This is my last show. I wanna open a Chinese hamburger store and start my business in a small country.

Wang: a small country?

Miao: Yea, a small country.

Wang: Which one?

Miao: How about America?

Wang: America? Small country?

Miao: What's wrong?

Wang: America is a small country?

Miao: If it's not a small country, why does it always borrow money from China?

(Selected from *Treasures of Shaanxi*)

Miao says that he intends to start his business and open a store of Chinese hamburger in a small country. At this time, a schema of “small country” is set up on the audience mind. Afterwards Miao adds that he is willing to start his business in America, which means in his CM, America is a small country. At the same time, a schema of America is formed as well. The two schemas are presented as Figure 2.7 and Figure 2.8.

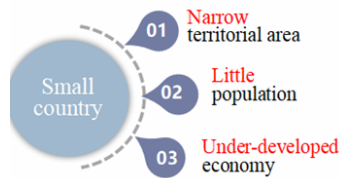


Fig.7 Schema of a small country

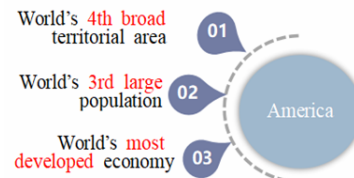


Fig.8 Schema of America

Figure 2.7 shows the three attributes of a small country: (1) narrow territorial area; (2) little population; (3) under-developed economy. And in Figure 2.8, attributes of America are given. It is obvious that America, a country with world’s 4th territorial area, 3rd large population and most developed economy, is little impossible to be a small country. So the two schemas won’t be compatible. However Miao believes America is a small country, he regards the two schemas as the same one. Thus the opposition between the two schemas, a small country and America, is produced, and the humor is then created.

Another example of Image-schematic structure is followed.

Example 5:

Miao: Do you know the origin of Chinese hamburger?

Wang: Origin?

Miao: It is said that there was an unimportant person in history, have you heard about him?

Wang: Who?

Miao: An unimportant person.

Wang: unimportant person?

Miao: His name is Liu Bang.

Wang: Who?! Liu Bang? The first Emperor of Han Dynasty is an unimportant person in history?!

(Selected from *Treasures of Shaanxi*)

In this example, Miao mentions that the special local food of Shaanxi, Rou Jia Mo (Chinese Hamburger) is invented by an unimportant person in history, named Liu Bang, who is the first emperor in Han Dynasty and contributed to the development of Han nation and culture. A schema of an unimportant person and a schema of Liu Bang are formed, and the schemas are shown as Figure 9 and Figure 10.

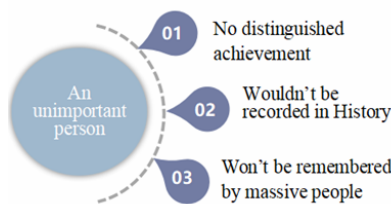


Fig.9 Schema of unimportant person

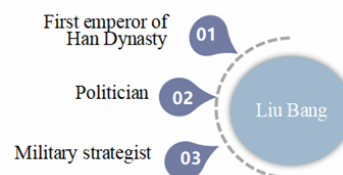


Fig.10 Schema of Liu Bang

As Figure 9 shows, an unimportant person refers to a person without distinguished achievement, who won’t be recorded into history and remembered by massive people. In Figure 2.10, a schema of Liu Bang is presented that he is the first emperor of Han Dynasty and he is a politician and military strategist as well. Thus Liu Bang cannot fit the schema of an unimportant person. However in Miao’s point of view, Liu Bang is an unimportant person, he thinks the two schemas are equal, which is not true. Therefore the conflict appears and the humor effect is created.

From the above two examples, we can see that to create humorous effect under the image-schematic structure, four steps have to be followed. Firstly, the performer proposes a concept, and a schema (schema 1) of the

concept is constructed at the moment; secondly, the performer puts forward another concept, and a new schema (schema 2) is build; thirdly, the performer concludes that the two concepts are the same, in other words, the two schema 1 equals to schema 2, however the two schemas are distinct to each other; finally the conflict between the two schemas arises and the humor is then produced.

3. Major Findings of the Study

In this study, the author analyzed ten crosstalk of Miao Fu and Wang Sheng's based on ICM theory. The author probe into the examples, and the explanatory power of ICM on humorous language in crosstalk has been shown. There are three main findings can be drawn from the above analysis.

3.1 Under ICM theory, only propositional structure and image-schematic structure can explain the verbal humor in crosstalk, whereas metaphorical mappings and metonymical mappings cannot. Besides, there are more cases of propositional structure than image-schematic structure.

3.2 In propositional structure, only one concept (ICM) is involved. Humor is caused by giving a new explanation of the concept, which is performers' own CM, breaking ICM of the concept. Different from propositional structure, in an image-schematic structure, two ICMs (schemas) are involved. The performers propose two concepts, i.e., two ICMs, which have little similarities. But the performers link the ICMs together and regard them as the same or have a entailment relation. For instance, in Example 4, Miao regards America is one of the small countries. Thus, to form a propositional structure is easier than to form an image-schematic structure for there is only one concept is involved. In a crosstalk performance, to created as much humor effects as possible in limited time, the performers will choose the simplest method to present more punch lines. That is the reason there are more cases of propositional structure in crosstalk than that of image-schematic structure.

3.3 Why can propositional and image-schematic structures explain verbal humor in crosstalk but metaphorical and metonymical mappings cannot? According to the above examples and analysis of propositional and image-schematic structure, it is obvious that both propositional structure and image-schematic structure deal with the conflicts of concepts. The difference is that propositional structure analyzes the internal conflicts of one ICM, while image-schematic structure analyzes the conflicts between two ICMs. Hegel believes that humor comes from conflict and contradiction. Thus, there is no doubt that propositional structure and image-schematic structure have explanatory power on verbal humor in crosstalk. However, metaphorical mappings and metonymical mapping deal with the similarities of concepts. If there is no similarity, there is no mappings between concepts. Therefore, it is hard to explain verbal humor in crosstalk in terms of metaphorical and metonymical mappings.

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