

The Mechanism of "Jokes Triggering" in Talk Show Speech: A Perspective of Cognitive Framing

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Abstract: Stand-up comedy is a form of personal improvisational speech or Talk Show speech that explores social issues and expresses personal opinions. Through actors' narration, performance, and interaction, Talk Show speech convey information to audiences and trigger humor. This article, based on Frame Theory which is proposed by American cognitive linguist Fillmore in "Frame Semantics", focuses on individual speeches in stand-up comedy conferences to investigate the phenomenon of "jokes triggering" in comedic discourse. It explores the mechanisms behind the generation of these jokes from the perspective of Frame Switching, elucidating the mechanisms through homophonic, polysemic and ambiguous puns, aiming at contributing to the understanding of humor creation in Chinese Talk Show speech.

Keywords: Talk Show Speech; Jokes Triggering; Cognitive Framing

1. Introduction

The term "Talk Show," originated in the early television era as a broadcast or television program where audiences gathered together to discuss topics presented by the host. Talk Show Speech is characterized by language humor, wit, and ingenuity, and come in various forms. In recent years, the novel language performance forms of Talk Shows have been popular among the Chinese public. Chinese Talk Shows originated in Hong Kong in the late 1980s and early 1990s and gradually developed into Chinese Mainland. The earliest Chinese Talk Show program can be traced back to 2003, when Hunan Satellite TV launched the "Super Girl" program. Since 2017, with the popularity of programs such as "Talk Show Symposium," Talk Shows have become a popular leisure and entertainment activity among young people in China.

The content of Chinese Talk Show programs mainly includes telling jokes, criticizing society, and sharing personal experiences. Through actors' narration, performance, and interaction, Talk Show programs convey information to audiences and trigger thinking and laughing. According to social development and audience demands, Chinese Talk Show program content covers topics such as politics, economics, history, culture, and more. Talk Show Symposium" is a Talk Show program in Chinese Mainland produced and broadcast by Zhejiang Satellite TV. Since its first broadcast in 2018, the program has aired four seasons and has become one of the most popular Talk Show programs in Chinese Mainland. The main feature of "Talk Show Symposium" is that actors improvise on stage and engage with the audience. Actors showcase their performance styles, some of which are humorous, witty, or sharp. The topics covered in the program are wide-ranging, from social hotspots to personal experiences, and actors express their opinions in various ways. In addition to the actors' performances, the program also invites celebrity guests, experts, and scholars to participate, increasing the program's interest and knowledgeability. Audiences can also interact and evaluate actors' performances through social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat" Talk Show Symposium" has sparked a craze in Chinese Mainland, attracting more people to pay attention to and enjoy this performance form.

Talk Shows are language-based literary programs, and language comprehension is crucial to the program. "Jokes triggering" is a key part of Talk Show performances and an important indicator of whether a Talk Show actor has sufficient humor and wisdom. Cognitive linguistics believes that language comprehension is a process of cognitive processing, which is constrained by cognitive mechanisms. This article analyzes the mechanism of "jokes triggering" from the perspective of cognitive "frame switching."

2. Theoretical Framework

Frame Theory is one of the important theories in cognitive linguistics, which was first proposed by American cognitive linguist Fillmore (1982) in "Frame Semantics". Frame Theory emphasizes that people rely on frame concepts when understanding and expressing language. A frame refers to a cognitive structure in people's minds about a concept, including the attributes of the concept, related events, and relationships between things, etc. [1]. The development of Frame Theory originated from the exploration of the essential relationship between language and thought. It is an important intersection of linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and other fields. Frames help people quickly understand and process information, as well as predict and infer new information. For example, when seeing a picture with a person and a dog, we automatically activate the information frames of "person" and "dog" to better understand and process the picture information. Frame theory also explains human cognitive biases and stereotypes. Because the frames stored in people's minds are influenced by various factors such as experience, culture, and social background, we may have fixed cognitive frames for certain concepts and things, which affect the understanding and judgment of new information [2].

Frame Theory can not only be applied to explain the basic mechanisms of human language communication, but also to research in other fields. For example, in computer science, frame theory can be used to design and implement intelligent systems to help computers better understand human language and thought [3]. In the field of psychotherapy, frame theory can be used to help people correct unhealthy cognitive frames so that they can better cope with challenges and difficulties in life. In addition, frame theory can also be applied to the fields of cognitive and social psychology, such as contextual effects, judgment and decision-making, emotion regulation, cultural cognition, and so on [3].

Lackoff believed that cognitive model was a mental structure for people to understand things in the world in the process of organizing and representing their knowledge which was composed of concepts and connections [4]. Fillmore also pointed out that in human language communication, people form initial frames through accumulated experience, and can also acquire new frames through language or other forms of information exchange. For example, when we learn a new vocabulary word, we not only learn its literal meaning, but also the semantic frame of the word in a specific context. With a deeper understanding of frames, we can better understand and use language, which also provides a foundation for us to better understand and process the surrounding world. Frame Theory views frames as a type of cognitive structure that includes knowledge, expectations, beliefs, values, and other factors about a topic, scene, or concept. In language communication, people understand and express information based on their existing frames. Computer scientist Minsky believes that knowledge is stored in memory in the form of data structures, which he calls frames [5]. As a representational structure, "framework" can be used to represent the characteristics of various objects, behaviors, and events in typical scenarios [6].

3. "Jokes setting" and "Jokes triggering" in Talk Show Speech

In the context of language, the quality of Talk Show speech depends largely on the creation and arrangement of language. In Talk Show speech, jokes triggering (bàogǎng) refers to the sudden use of classic jokes or lines from popular topics or events by performers or hosts during a performance, or the sudden introduction of a new and unexpected perspective, in order to achieve an unexpected and humorous effect. "Jokes triggering" typically requires a widely known topic or event as a premise among the audience group, and the performer or host must use their own intelligence and creativity to cleverly integrate the "explosive point" into their performance, creating unexpected laughter and producing a strong resonance and favorable impression among live and online audiences. Therefore, "jokes setting" (shègǎng) is the fundamental and essential process of triggering jokes.

"Jokes setting" refers to the use of interesting words or expressions in Talk Show speech performances to resonate with the audience. Talk Show performers need to consider various factors, such as the audience's language background, cultural knowledge, and cognitive preferences when devising "jokes setting." They combine two or more different cognitive frameworks into one context, using the original framework to create a new understanding framework, and thus triggering the audience's curiosity and sense of humor.

The techniques for "jokes setting" include: 1) Activating the audience's existing frameworks. Based on the audience's familiar cultural, social, and personal experiences, performers can use familiar language phenomena and cultural elements to stimulate audience consensus, thus producing "jokes." 2) Using puns and ambiguous language. Puns and ambiguity can make language humorous, vivid, and

imaginative. 3) Using contrast and exaggeration. Performers create punchlines by contrasting or exaggerating different elements and resonating within the audience's framework. 4) Referring to social and current events. The topics commonly discussed in Talk Show speech are closely related to society and current events, and performers can use these topics to construct humorous language. 5) inserting personal style and characteristics. Each Talk Show performer has their own style and characteristics, and they can use their own style and characteristics as a basis for creating and generating humorous language. Therefore, when devising "jokes setting," Talk Show performers need to determine the audience's language, cultural background, and cognitive preferences, use the audience's existing frameworks to create a new cognitive framework, choose appropriate vocabulary, expression methods, and creative methods to produce humorous effects. Except for avoiding the offending of the audience, humorous creation requires respect for the audience's culture and values and the avoidance of offending the audience's emotions and beliefs.

"Jokes triggering" is the most noticeable and interesting language in Talk Show speech, which is based on the "jokes setting", it can attract the audience's frame switching and produce a humorous effect. However, in order to achieving successfully "jokes triggering" in a Talk Show speech, performers need to be familiar with semantic frameworks, possess rich language knowledge and creativity, and master the techniques of "jokes setting." The Framework Theory of cognitive structure can help people establish a new cognitive framework when they understand the language, based on their existing experience, knowledge, and expected frameworks. Therefore, in Talk Show speeches, Framework Theory can help performers create and trigger new cognitive frameworks, and ultimately produce a humorous effect.

4. Case Analysis

Based on the "jokes setting", the "jokes triggering" is the creation and use of cultural references or cognitive frameworks in comedy performances. The Framework Theory explains how humans rely on existing cognitive frameworks to process and understand information. In comedy performances, comedians use different cognitive frameworks to trigger a humorous response in the audience by switching between them. The triggering of jokes is achieved through language techniques, such as exaggeration, reversal, contrast, and non-verbal cues, such as tone of voice, pitch, and speed. The homophonic pun mechanism creates a connection between two words with similar or identical pronunciation, establishing a cognitive framework for meaning transfer and leading to the "jokes triggering" effect. We will analyze three aspects of homophonic puns: similar pronunciation and spelling, similar pronunciation but different spelling, and near-similar pronunciation but different spelling.

4.1 Homophonic puns

The creation of homophonic puns in comedy is when performers utilize the multiple meanings of a word to set up puns that have the similar pronunciation or spelling. This creates various frames of understanding, and switching between these frames creates the humorous effect.

4.1.1 Homophonic puns with similar pronunciation and spelling

Homophonic jokes bear the quality of having the same pronunciation as one or more other words with a different origin and meaning. There are two basic types of homophonic puns: those that use the direct phonetic similarity between words, and those that create phonetic similarity through changes in the grammatical structure of words, which leads to different interpretations and understanding frameworks. The generation of homophonic puns is a technique used by Talk Show hosts to exploit the feature of words having the same pronunciation but different meanings. The mechanism uses the multiple meanings of a word to create a pun, setting up different cognitive frames and switching between them to create a humorous effect. For example:

(1) "Li Xiaolu, don't look down on me. Although I don't have your daughter's popularity, I've drunk 'nuerhong' (daughter red wine)." (Wang Jianguo)

Comedian Wang Jianguo uses the multiple meanings of "nuerhong" to create a homophonic pun. The word "nuerhong" has two different cognitive frames: "the daughter of actress Li Xiaolu, who has high fame" and "a famous glutinous rice wine mainly produced in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, China." The first "nuerhong" activates the cognitive frame of "the daughter of actress Li Xiaolu, who has high fame," while the second "nuerhong" activates the cognitive frame of "a famous glutinous rice wine

mainly produced in Shaoxing, Zhejiang, China." The two different cognitive frames appear in a common context, forming a homophonic pun due to their same pronunciation and spelling. Wang Jianguo expresses that he can afford to drink famous glutinous rice wine, although he does not have the same fame as Li Xiaolu's daughter, by making a pun on the multiple meanings of "nuerhong(wine or fame)," achieving a humorous effect and resonating with the audience.

4.1.2 Homophonic puns with similar pronunciation but different spelling

Homophonic puns can also create a humorous effect by playing on the phonetic similarity between two or more words while they are different in spelling. The use of phonetic similarity to create homophonic puns can lead to a variety of meanings and can be transformed in different contexts, eliciting resonance from the audience. In the Talk Show speech, homophonic puns are used to mislead the audiences, creating a huge contrast between the frameworks launched before and after, so as to achieve frame transfer. It shows that homophonic puns are the basis for audiences to build different meanings. Different understanding of the puns can activate different corresponding frameworks [7]. For example:

(2) "I heard that you have no strength to tie a chicken, you don't even have abdomen, how can you have any power?" (Donnie Yen)

In example (2), actor Donnie Yen uses the homophonic pun between "abdomen" and "tie a chicken" to create humor. Yen first praises Li Dan as a cultural person, and then immediately shifts the tone to teasing Li Dan as a weak bookworm. The framework created by "tie a chicken" is the action of tying up a chicken, while the framework activated by "no strength to tie a chicken" is that of a person who is physically weak and lacks strength. The semantic framework created by "abdomen" is that of a person with a strong physique. Yen uses the phonetic similarity between "abdomen" and "tie a chicken" to switch between two different cognitive frameworks to create humor.

In addition, homophonic puns can also be created by changing the grammatical structure of words and using the phonetic similarity between words to create a humorous effect. By changing the grammatical form of words, the phonetic similarity between different words can be used to create different interpretation frameworks, leading to a pun effect. For example:

(3) "I was actually quite nervous at the time, I thought, as the wife of "Siwen", who am I after the divorce. Cheng Lu, who is Cheng Lu? There was no road in this world, but the road was formed as more people walked on it. No, this is not Cheng Lu, it's 'Cheng Lu' (meaning 'becoming a road')." Cheng Lu

Comedian Cheng Lu used the same phonetic sound of her name "Cheng Lu" and "chenglu" (meaning "becoming a road") to create a homophonic pun. "Cheng Lu" is the name of the comedian, while "chenglu" means "becoming a road", which comes from a quote by Lu Xun, "There was no road in this world, but the road was formed as more people walked on it". Comedian Cheng Lu uses the phonetic similarity of these two words to combine them into "Cheng Lu" and refer to another frame, thus creating a frame transition between her name "Cheng Lu" and the concept of "the road formed as more people walked on it" that are unrelated in meaning. The comedian uses the phonetic similarity of "Cheng Lu" and "chenglu" to switch between two frames that have no connection in meaning, thus achieving the humorous goal of informing the audience that she has gone through many hardships to become a good actress.

4.1.3 Homophonic puns with near-similar pronunciation but different spelling

The generation of near-homophone pun is the use of the characteristics of easily confused pronunciation in Mandarin Chinese (such as n and l) by the stand-up comedian to set two words with near-similar phonetic pronunciations as puns, thereby igniting the frame switching mechanism of the semantic information of the two words to achieve the effect of "punchline." For example:

(4) I don't know if you are like me, but any boss in the company can give you a free title without giving you a raise. Seriously, whether it's a manager or a VP, they will make you a title next only to the emperor (a "thousand-year-old" something). Happy, right? Later, I found out that it's a monthly salary of nine thousand before tax. (Hulan)

In example (4), the "jokes triggering" generation is based on the phonetic similarity and confusion between "nine-thousand-years-old" and "nine-thousand-tax", and is constructed by combining the characteristics of the two. The phonetic difference between "sui" and "shui" in "years-old" and "tax" is the result of the difference between "s" and "sh" in their pronunciation. "Nine-thousand-years-old" was

used to praise the emperor as "long live," while "nine-thousand-years-old" was used to flatter a powerful minister, meaning second only to the emperor. In the stand-up comedian Hulan's joke, the "nine-thousand-years-old" framework, representing high status, power, and wealth, is transferred to "nine-thousand-tax," meaning "monthly salary of nine-thousand yuan without tax" for ordinary workers. Under the conversion of two unrelated frameworks, the "jokes triggering" is successfully achieved, expressing the mockery of the current phenomenon of "office workers" and achieving a humorous effect.

4.2 Polysemic puns

The mechanism of generating polysemic puns is to "trigger the joke" through an individual word or phrase that can be used (in different contexts) to express two or more different meanings. By establishing two different frames with two identical or similar cognitive models, the audience is made to switch between different frame meanings, thus producing unexpected effects. For example:

(5) Hello everyone, I am Li Xueqin. I don't know what it means, but let me, who doesn't have a partner, talk about getting married beautifully. I said I don't have a partner, and the enthusiastic ones asked me, what kind of partner do you want? (Audience: Wang Jianguo), Wang Jianguo won't do. I said I want to find someone complementary to me, because my biggest hobby now is lying in bed, and I hope that the person I find has the biggest hobby of mopping the floor, walking the dog, doing laundry, cooking, washing dishes, and cleaning the house. Someone said, why don't you just hire a housekeeper with money? I said you are smart, and if I can afford a housekeeper, why do I need to find a partner? (Li Xueqin)

In corpus (5), the stand-up comedian Li Xueqin associates the cognitive frame of "partner" in the same category with the cognitive frame of "housekeeper" to construct a joke. First, housekeepers and partners are personnel who share the burden of household chores such as mopping the floor, walking the dog, doing laundry, cooking, washing dishes, and cleaning the house. Second, whether it is a housekeeper or a partner, money is needed to pay for their work. These semantic similarities become the basis for "jokes triggering". Such frame switching, on the one hand, makes the discussion of marriage and love problems more diverse, vivid, and concrete by jokingly comparing finding a partner (man) with finding a housekeeper; on the other hand, it also reveals the general phenomenon of role reversal between men and women in modern families, and the traditional Chinese family pattern of "men working outside and women working inside" is undergoing changes. By organically combining these two frames, the social functions of housekeepers and partners are equated, triggering the audience's frame switching and thus producing a humorous effect.

In addition, based on the semantic extension between people or things in different categories, it also becomes a way to generate "jokes triggering". For example:

(6) Stand-up comedian Hulan shares a story about her mother falling victim to scams in daily life. In recent years, crimes targeting the elderly through scams have been on the rise, with scammers constantly developing new tactics. The large elderly population has become a prime target for fraudsters. In her stand-up act, Hulan humorously refers to her mother as "AKA the Northeast Financial Witch," claiming that she has dominated the financial market for over a decade, venturing from stocks to bitcoin, consistently falling for scams along the way. Ultimately, Hulan sarcastically remarks, "In fact, finance and medicine are the same; they both play with heartbeats. Don't try to be a hero for the sake of your heartbeat."

In excerpt (6), Hulan generates a "jokes triggering" by highlighting the similarity between "finance" and "medicine" in terms of heartbeat fluctuations. Hulan's mother's involvement in the financial market, her commitment of all her resources, and her repeated failures and struggles create a suspenseful and exciting narrative that triggers a sense of anticipation in the audience, similar to the ups and downs of heartbeat in the medical field. Based on this analogy, the comedic punchline of switching between the frames of "financial heartbeat" and "medical heartbeat" in the joke results in laughter. This line immediately enhances the comedic significance of the performance, provoking laughter while also conveying warmth, sparking contemplation, and striking a chord with the audience.

4.3 Ambiguous puns

The mechanism of generating puns is through the combination or transformation of the ambiguous words in different semantic contexts, triggering cognitive shifts in these frames and making the audience laugh. As a representation structure, frameworks can be used to represent the characteristics of various objects, behaviors, and events^[7]. For example:

(7) Xu Zhisheng talked about the strange things he has encountered since entering into the entertainment business industry, such as going to record a live broadcast for product sales, and the receptionist asking him, "When will our artists arrive?" (He is an artist himself.) After hearing that the product assigned to him by the director was a face mask, he jokingly told the director, "With my looks, I could sell both face and mask, but selling face masks might be too risky?" (Xu Zhisheng)

Xu Zhisheng, a post-95 comedian, has always had a sensitive and insecure mentality due to his unremarkable appearance since childhood. The stories that happened to him because of his lack of confidence in appearance have become the material for his comedy sketches. He once joked that when he goes on stage, the audience can't help but take a few more glances at him, and then say, "This is funny! Haha." The implication is that the audience is attracted to his "unique" appearance. In corpus (7), Xu Zhisheng's puns are focused on the cognitive frame transformation from "miàn (flour)" and "mó (steamed bun)" to "miànmó (face mask)." Miàn" is an important staple food in the daily diet of ordinary people; "mó" generally refers to steamed buns. In the northwest region of China, steamed buns are usually called "mó." While "Face mask" is a category of skin care products used for moisturizing the skin, as well as for hydration, nourishment, improving appearance, deep cleaning, and other functions. Xu Zhisheng knows that he doesn't have a good appearance, and the advertiser gave him live sales of beauty products- "face masks," instead of food- "miàn and "mó." Therefore, when the comedian links these common items in daily life together to create a sketch, the audience cannot help but burst into laughter, achieving the humorous effect.

From the above example, we can see that the puns in Talk Show speech are based on the cognitive frame switch mechanism. Setting up puns means triggering the audience's thinking frame through familiar concepts or events, thereby setting the intention of the subsequent content. Blasting puns means switching the audience's thinking frame through drastically different associations. This pun-making mechanism based on cognitive frame switching not only allows the audience to better understand the performer's language but also enables the audience to have more fun while watching the show. By flexibly using cognitive frames to switch, performers achieve the humorous effect, which is also the unique attraction of Talk Shows to the audience.

5. Conclusion

This paper explored the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms behind the "jokes triggering" in Chinese Talk Show speech. Through a comprehensive analysis of the language features and humor types in three popular Chinese Talk Shows, this study has revealed the key elements that contribute to the successful display of Chinese Talk Show speech humor.

The study found that puns are frequently used in Chinese Talk Show speech, as they are effective in creating humor by playing with the multiple meanings and pronunciations of Chinese characters. This study has highlighted the importance of cognitive mechanisms in humor creation, particularly the use of cognitive frames and cognitive dissonance. It explores the mechanisms behind the generation of these jokes from the perspective of Frame Switching, elucidating the mechanisms through homophonic, polysemic and ambiguous puns.

In sum, this thesis has contributed to the understanding of humor creation in Chinese Talk Show speech and has provided insights into the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms that underlie humor production. It is hoped that this study will inspire further research in the field of humor studies and facilitate cross-cultural communication and understanding.

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