Humor Generation in Mr. Bean's Holiday from the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Abstract: This paper takes Mr.Bean's Holiday as the research subject to explore the generation of humor from the perspective of Relevance Theory. The study aims to demonstrate the applicability of humor generation mechanisms in films and highlight the significance of non-verbal humor in creating comedic effects. By analyzing the interaction between verbal and non-verbal humor, this research examines how both forms contribute individually and collectively to the overall humor effect in the film. The paper also delves into how non-verbal elements, such as facial expressions, body language, and visual gags, complement and enhance verbal humor to create a cohesive comedic narrative. Through detailed analysis, this study seeks to affirm the explanatory power of Relevance Theory in understanding humor in films, emphasizing its capacity to account for the interplay of different humor modalities. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of integrating verbal and non-verbal humor in cinematic storytelling.

Keywords: Relevance Theory; Humor; Nonverbal Humor; Humor Mechanism

1. Introduction

Pragmatics as a linguistic paradigm, exhibits less uniformity than other consolidated linguistic paradigm, as seen in Structuralism and Generative Grammar. As a consequence, pragmatics represents a diversity of schools and research programs that have tackled specific areas of human communication and comprehension. Humor heavily relies on peoople's comprehension in certain context so that it is closely related related to the pragmatic field. Sperber and Wilson s Relevance Theory is not a theory specifically designed for the analysis of humor, but its theoretical hypotheses are suited to deal with how humorous interpretations are generated. It is a pragmatic theory of human communication, which proposes a single cognitive principle of relevance applicable to the interpretation of all types of discourse, humorous discourses included. This principle reflects the (biologically rooted) human tendency to try and find relevant information in the utterances and non-verbal behavior that people use in order to communicate [1].

It's important to note that there is no parallel between people laughing and humor. A smile contains a lot of meaning, and people smile when they feel humor always with an unexpected feeling. Researches working on this way explore the nature of humor, when and why people laugh, and what controls our sense of humor.

Concerning studies of humor, the explanation of it under Grice's Cooperative Principle has been popular, mainly concentrating on the intentional violation of maxims so as to achieve the intended humorous effects [2]. However, this point remains controversial. Under the principle of Relevance Theory, people can achieve the optimal relevance without the prerequisite of cooperation. So the relevance approach does not agree with this hypothesis that assumes that humorous effect is the result of violation of Grice's maxims.

Besides, there are three notably influential theories about the study of humor in the psychology, Superiority Theory in 17th century, Incongruity Theory in 18th century put forward by Schopenhauer [3] and the last, Relief Theory in 19th century presented by Freud [4]. In linguistics, the theories mostly used for investigation of humor are from Grice's [5] Cooperative Principle, Austin [6] and Searle's [7] Speech Acts, Sperber and Wilson [8] Relevance Theory, Fauconnier and Turne's [9] Conceptual Blending Theory. For the reason that humor in principle belongs to communicative category and the comprehension of humor needs the cognitive

processing of human brain and the fact that Relevance Theory is a theory of communication and cognition, accordingly it is felicitous to draw on this theory to study the production of humor in films. Therefore, our research question is that in this film how it can make humor and second, which and in what way humor mechanism is mostly used.

2. Literature Review

The Relevance Theory, premised on Gricean's communicational modal, put forward by Sperber and Wilson. It has gained much popularity since it is proposed, aiming at dealing with the specific drawbacks in Cooperative Principle and creatively reducing the four maxims to one. Due to its wide applicability, it has been use to account for various linguistic phenomena, mostly irony and metaphor.

The main contribution it made is to assume that people depend on one single interpretive principle. This principle states that the first interpretation which provides an optimal balance of interest cognitive effects and mental effort, is the one that the speaker possibly intends to communicate, and hence it is the one selected, and interpretation stops at this point [10].

Here we ascribe humor into the communicative category, for it makes an indispensable role in communication. It can be divided into verbal humor and non-verbal humor based on the forms of humor whether it depends on language. Namely, the former includes humor in the media of language while the latter is about non-verbal modalities, such as facial expressions or body activities. In detail, nonverbal humor characterizes cartoons and pantomime. Verbal humor uses language as the medium, according to the special context, to achieve the purpose of humor through innuendo, irony, exaggeration, pun and other means. Obviously, several studies has been made aimed at non-verbal humor. However, the significance of the non-verbal should be emphasized. Especially in films and televisions where various modalities abound, they functions significantly in decoding the linguistic information and the transformation of humorous effects. Some fundamental non-linguistic factors in films and televisions includes actions, the background music, camera transitions and sound effects

3. Analysis

This section is aimed at providing us with the related factors during the production of humor and explaining how the factors mentioned above function and how humor generates based on relevance-theoretical approach in Mr. Bean's Holiday.

3.1 Data Collection

Mr. Bean's Holiday is a classic British comedy that revolves around Mr. Bean's trip to France and vividly depicts a series of hilarious experiences that occur during the trip. There are three reasons for choosing this film: it is classic and highly recognized by the world; Its high box office indicates that it is favored by the public; the last is that body activities and facial expressions dominate this film with fewer utterances, a feature that can also help us refocus on the role of nonverbal humor. Therefore, taking it as the research object, we can explore how to make full use of humor to make people laugh and further enrich the mechanism of humor generation.

3.2 Relative Factors in Humor Generation in the Film

What we should notice is that, therefore, the usefulness of Relevance Theory for the study of humor is not in the claim that being humorous is a property of texts, thus making us concentrate on their structure, but in the claim that texts are only indirectly humorous, and that what we need to understand to characterize verbal humour are the mental processes that a hearer goes through during interpretation when humorous effects are derived. Same as analysis of nonverbal humor, we cannot simply ascribe any kind of discourse as humorous, only if the mental process of humor is involved. The same goes for film analysis.

Cognitive processing takes place in the human brain, so the cognitive environment of the cognitive subject will restrict the success of humor production. For instance, embodied experience, encyclopaedic knowledge, logic and other factors can promote or restrict the humorous process. Apart from that, humor generation heavily depends on context and implied meaning. Any language or action is not humorous, only when it is combined with the specific context and the communicative

intentions, it will produce humor [11]. It can account to the background knowledge in films. If linguistic factor is not taken into account, the inner thoughts of characters are mostly conveyed through their actions or facial expressions, and when the background knowledge or characters' behaviors contradict their real thoughts, humor often occurs.

In conclusion, factors including linguistic and non-linguistic information, cognitive context, relevance, informative intention and communicative intention play a key role in it. Therefore, in the following conditions that we can possibly achieve humorous effects: the contrast between the greatest relevance and the optimal relevance, the contrast between informational intention and communicative intention, the inconsistency between the input information and cognitive context. Apart from that, the cognitive knowledge of human beings including embodied experience, encyclopedic knowledge and the logic can also act as a facilitator or a constraint [12]. Humor in films also obey the common cognitive rules, and we can frame it under the discussion of generation of humorous film in the following three dimensions.

Firstly, the contrast between the greatest relevance and the optimal relevance should be noticed. The most basic assumption of Relevance Theory is that human communication and cognitive activities are subject to relevance. Usually, when people communicate, they convey information and change the cognitive environment of both parties at the same time, and the speaker hopes that the listener can deduce his intention and achieve successful communication. Discourse understanding and reasoning are the key points of successful communication in speech communication. Specifically, the understanding of humor has its own unique features. The speaker often gives a proposition first, leading the listener to deduce a most relevant explanation, but then leads to a completely opposite or unexpected proposition, so that he has to start the deduction process again, so as to get the optimal relevance of the proposition and understand the speaker's real intention. Humor arises from the contradiction between the greatest relevance and the optimal relevance.

Secondly, the contrast between informational intention and communicative intention also matters. If the listener understands the literal meaning, the information intention is also obtained, and the information intention is most relevant if it fully conforms to the listene's contextual assumptions. If the explicit information is not sufficiently related to the listener's contextual assumptions, the listener will gradually expand the cognitive context, make efforts to process the information, and the reasoning process will continue until the speaker's communicative intention can be understood. Most of the time, intended meaning of utterances is not just a simple superposition of its individual word units. Therefore, from the perspective of Relevance Theory, humor arises from the contrast between the literal meaning of utterances and its potential pragmatic meaning. This is also same in films.

Thirdly, the inconsistency between the input information and cognitive context should be taken into account. In this theory, the context refers to more than one type: linguistic context or co-context, non-linguistic context, cognitive context. Generally, this term includes a set of assumptions held in human brain, which function during the process of utterance understanding. Normally, new information keep emerges as the communication goes on, so the assumptions keep modified, strengthened or overthrown. Context is constantly updated in this way. There are three cases of the generation of contextual effects: new information combines with present contextual assumptions to produce new contextual implications; new information strengthens present contextual assumptions and the third is that new information contradicts presents contextual assumptions and is sufficient to overturn them. Within the three condition, humor generates when new information modified or known information overthrown. Certainly, extra efforts are needed to gain the relevance. Humorous results will occur to hearers. All of the above can be achieved in films through a variety of modes, not just language.

3.3 Analysis of Data of the Mechanism of Humor Generation in Mr. Bean's Holiday
(1) The contrast between the greatest relevance and the optimal relevance
In one scene, the boy is talking to the owner of the CD in a crowd of stalls, and the cognitive

assumption of cognitive subject is that he wants to buy the CD, which has the greatest relevance. But the next scene shows that during this conversation a wire appears on the stereo behind the boss, seemingly trying to pull it away. The camera turns around and it turns out that Mr. Bean is doing this. At this point, the cognitive subject has to search for information from the known information and reconstruct the cognitive hypothesis: Is Mr. Bean interested in the stereo? Does Mr. Bean want to sell him for money? Does the boy want a stereo instead of a CD. But the only known information is in another scene, increasingly amplified footage of Mr. Bean smiling thoughtfully at a busking band, and the cognitive subject deduces that 'The boy was pretending to talk to the owner to get his attention so that Mr. Bean could steal the stereo, in this way they had the equipment to busk.' This arrives at optimal relevance. The optimal relevance 'Two people aims to steal a stereo' is in sharp contrast to the previous greatest relevance of cognitive subject reasoning 'the boy wants to buy a CD'.

In another scene, when the director presses the explosive button in anger because of the frequent failure of the explosive mechanism, his hat momentarily flies into the sky, at which point the audience assumes that something happens to the director. In the next shot, the ambulance is approaching, and the cognitive object reconstructs the cognitive hypothesis: Is there someone injured over there? Is that part of the set? However, the only relevant information that the cognitive subject can find is that Mr. Bean unplugs the explosion control machine in order to charge his camera, making everyone think that the explosion mechanism has failed, but when Mr. Bean plugs it back in, the director unknowingly presses the button and the explosion occurs. At this time, the optimal relevance that Bean indirectly causes the explosion and the injury of the director, makes contrast with the greatest relevance that the director is innocent of the explosion attack. But without knowing it, he continues to shoot wild flowers and weeds on the side of the road, with the chaotic scene and the thick smoke spreading in the background, which together create a humorous situation. Generally, it happens not frequently.

(2)The contrast between informational intention and communicative intention

When the boy talks to the CD vendor, his utterances of informational intention is to buy the CD he wants. However, his real communicational intention is to draw the vendor's attention so that they can steal the stereo. In total, it happens the least.

(3)The inconsistency between the input information and cognitive context

When Mr. Bean orders the seafood platter recommended by the waiter, according to his expression when he sees the platter and the audience's previous watching of the movie, the cognitive context is that Mr. Bean does not like to eat seafood and should not eat it. In the next scene, Mr. Bean is forced to enjoy eating one after another under the waiter's watchful eye, which is inconsistent with the audience's logic. In another scene, when Mr. Bean takes a taxi, the audience assumes that he will take the taxi to Cannes for a holiday, but in the next scene, someone happens to get into his taxi and the next car comes along, and Mr. Bean gets into the wrong car and goes in the opposite direction, which overturns the audience's cognitive context.

When he arrives at the wrong place, the audience assumes that he will take a new taxi or walk in the same direction, but he moves the needle of his compass directly in the direction of his location and walks to the destination, which is contrary to logic. Typically, it happens the most, here we list three of representatives.

4. Conclusion

In our film, the third mechanism happens the most frequently, while the second happens the least, which is closely related to the characteristics of the film, almost voiceless. Though there are few utterances, we still can get the point of humor through change of scene, proving the significance and value of nonverbal humor. In this paper, how humorous understandings are generated is explained based on Relevance Theory and three mechanisms of humor. By analyzing the characteristics of humor production of Mr. Bean's holiday, hopefully we can get some enlightenment on how such almost voiceless film reach the humorous goal.

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