

## A Comparative Study of the Humorous Speech Act between *Love Apartment* and *Friends*

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**Abstract:** Humor, as a universal language phenomenon, is an important part in people's daily life, which can improve human relations, bring pleasant feeling to people. A sitcom, short form for a situation comedy, consists of a large quantity of humors, and is one of the best carrier forms of humor. *Friends* is one of the most successful American sitcoms. *Love Apartment* also enjoys great popularity in China. Under the theoretical framework of speech act theory, this paper analyses the similarities and difference of humorous speech acts in these two famous sitcoms and explores the reasons behind the difference and aims to help the audience have a better interpretation of the sitcoms.

**Keywords:** *Love Apartment*, *Friends*, humorous speech act.

### INTRODUCTION

Humor, as an important means of human communication can be easily found in daily conversations, films, televisions, books, magazines, and newspapers. Humor not only makes people feel relaxed and cheerful, but also helps cultivate friendly social relations and deal with embarrassing situations in communication. It is safe to say humor plays an important role in all cultures. Therefore, researchers and scholars from various fields, such as linguistics, sociology, psychology, philosophy, etc. have attached great importance to the study of humor phenomena, such as the research on the generation of humor, understanding as well as the application of humor from different perspectives.

Among such studies, the studies on situation comedy accounts for the large part.

Situation comedy, often shortened to sitcom, consists of a large quantity of humorous utterances. *Friends* is one of the most influential situation comedy in the history of the United States and it also occupies an important position on a global scale. With the development of globalization, Chinese sitcom is greatly influenced by it. *Love Apartment*, a very popular sitcom in recent years, is considered as the Chinese version of *Friends* but it is localized both from the character settings and from the humor generation [1]. Liu Bo [2] conducts a case study on the humorous speech in *Friends* and he thinks verbally expressed humor in American sitcoms embodies a rich and varied phenomenon which is worth studying. It is widely recognized that humorous utterances (HU) complete general illocutionary acts while practicing the act of amusing [2]. He Fangzhi takes *Love Apartment* as an example and explores the gender difference in verbal humors with a quantitative and qualitative method and finds that different gender adopts different manners to

make humor [3]. Although there are many studies on the humorous speech of *Friends* and *Love Apartment*, they usually focus on either of them. Otherwise, *Friends* will be compared by its local sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* and *Love Apartment* will be compared by *I Love My Family*. There is less study on the comparison of the humorous speech acts between these two sitcoms. At present, some of the comparison focuses on characters in these sitcoms. Hu yifei and Monica have similar characteristics and they always take care for others; Lu zhanbo isn't talkative but with high IQ which is similar to Ross, and the other characters in *Love Apartment* have their corresponding ones in *Friends* [4]. Some emphasizes the different ways of thinking among the young people. Chinese young people's ways of thinking have already westernized to a certain degree from the perspective of individualism and attitude to entertainment and homosexuality [5]. The comparison of the humorous speech between the two is mainly from the perspective of culture. As the major theory in pragmatics, speech act theory provides a new perspective to compare their humorous speech acts. As two famous sitcoms, they share the common rules in

generating humor, whereas, due to different cultural backgrounds, there must be differences in humor generation. This paper will analyze and compare the main patterns of generating humor and find the reasons for these differences.

### THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Initially proposed by J. L. Austin, Speech Act Theory (SAT) is the first major theory in pragmatics which is designed to answer how to say something is to do things and demonstrates the linguistic concept of "doing things by saying (or actions performed via utterances)". The theory had a great impact on the development of linguistics in the following 20 or 30 years. Austin [6] pointed out that people's uttering is in fact to implement some certain behavior and this kind of behavior is reached by the utterances, thus he named this behavior Speech Act. According to him, the speech act is classified into three types:

- **Locutionary act:** the act of saying itself including the utterances of certain phonetics, syllables, words, sentences, etc.
- **Illocutionary act:** performing an act such as giving information or a warning, answering a verdict, expressing a greeting, sending out an invitation or an order, making a compliment or a criticism, asking or answering questions and so on by means of "saying". In this sense, to say something is to do something and the act of performing is known as the illocutionary act which is included in locutionary act.
- **Perlocutionary act:** the effects or consequences brought or achieved by saying something. For instance, through the act of utterances, the hearer, the speaker or relevant parties are persuaded, threatened, warned, conceived or misled to do something [6].

Verbal humor arises from some intervention in the expression of normal conversation, which results in disharmony in language communication. This conversational response is either derived from unintentionally irrelevant answer or from deliberate misrepresentation. Humorous speech act defines humor as a speech act in which people use words to amuse others, to express their wisdom and emotions. In other words, humorous language results from the co-effects between the language and the language users. Besides, the process of humorous speech act is a four-item system including 'object in question---the speaker---language symbol---the hearer'. The 'speaker' and 'hearer' are two language users [7]. In order to make people understand and get humorous feelings, a mutual-known relationship should exist between both language users and language symbols. The humorous effect can merely be manifested in a specific context through the language of the speaker. Hence, humor doesn't belong to language itself, but a speech act.

### THE HUMOROUS SPEECH ACTS IN *LOVE APARTMENT & FRIENDS*

#### Emphasis of the illocutionary act

(Scene in *Friends*: Monica has a date with a new guy, others want to see this guy.)

Joey: So when do we get to meet the guy?

Monica: Let's see, today's Monday...Never.

All: Oh, come on! Come on!

Monica: No. Not after what happened with Steve.

Chandler: What are you talking about? We love Schhteve! Schhteve was schhexy!...sorry

Monica: Look, I don't even know how I feel about him yet. Just give me a chance to figure that out.

Rachel: Well, then can we meet him?

Monica: Nope. Schhorry.

Chandler's illocutionary act of saying "We love Schhteve! Schhteve was schhexy!" is to tease Monica by imitating her ex-boyfriend Steve who has an obvious accent in the pronunciation of the letter S when speaking. This time, Monica has a new boyfriend and she is afraid that the people will destroy the romantic relationship between her and her boyfriend again, so she refuses to introduce her new boyfriend to them. In response, Monica emphasizes this illocutionary act by using the weird pronunciation of the letter S. By doing this, on the one hand, the humorous effect is achieved, on the other hand, she tells them in this way so that they will never see her new boyfriend.

(Scene in *Love Apartment*: Xiaoxian uses 100 yuan as a prize to ask Ziqiao to talk about his advantages and virtues.)

曾小贤：“有奖问答，我的优点和特长是什么？”

子乔：“我是不会昧着良心说话的。其实你的优点很多，比如，坚强勇敢，为人很好，还而不舍。”

曾小贤：“我有那么优秀吗？”

子乔独白：“坚强勇敢：曾老师被戴绿帽子这么多年，居然还活着；为人很好：每次被女孩甩了之后，女孩总说你为人很好；锲而不舍：有一次在餐厅，他和我们僵持了六个小时，最后关谷实在忍不住，去买单了。”

This example applied the garden path phenomena which is a temporary ambiguity phenomenon in the process of language processing arising from the failure of expectation. It belongs to semantic short circuit of the cognitive stream of consciousness. The original interpretation of the adjectives leads to the failure of expectation thus humor is generated [8].

In order to gain the 100 Yuan prize, Ziqiao lists the advantages and virtues of Xiaoxian: Strong and brave, nice and persistent, and says that he would not tell lies. Actually, Xiaoxian is happy to hear Ziqiao's reply but still questions "Am I that good?". The audience also have such doubt because Xiaoxian is not

a person with those virtues and they think Ziqiao tells lies for the 100 Yuan prize. Therefore, there is congruity between the praiseful words and the fact of not telling lies of Ziqiao [9]. However, Ziqiao's monologue provides the evidence of his opinion that he thinks Xiaoxian has those virtues: Xiaoxian had a girlfriend for eight years but she had a boyfriend for eight years, for Ziqiao, Xiaoxian has cheated for so long time but he is still alive thus Xiaoxian is strong and brave. Xiaoxian is a nice guy because every girl says so when she dumps him. As for the persistence of Xiaoxian, he holds on to the end in the six hours' stalemate about who will pay the bill when Ziqiao, Xiaoxian and Guangu stay in the restaurant and it is ended by Guangu paying the bill. Upon hearing the words: Strong and brave, nice and persistent, based on the common knowledge, all the audience think these words are used to praise someone. The audience expect the commendatory examples for Xiaoxian but the ironically reasonable explanation of those words breaks people's expectation and gains a surprise effect in the sudden transition from praising someone to revealing his shortcomings by stressing the meaning of the phrases.

Most English words contain more than one syllables, and there are nearly ten thousand syllables in English resulting in multi-syllables in pronunciation of English words. In the emphasis of the illocutionary speech act, *Friends* takes the advantage of the pronunciation of English and uses repetition and stress. In Chinese, one word may both have derogatory and commendatory meanings. It is difficult to determine the derogatory and commendatory meaning of one word but contextual analysis can make the determination easier [10]. *Love Apartment* chooses the commendatory adjectives to show a derogatory meaning to overset audience's common understanding of the words thus producing humorous effect.

#### LOSS OF ILLOCUTIONARY ACT

(Scene in *Friends*: The guys rushed to the roof to see the big balloon but when they came back to the apartment, they found no one brought the key.)

Monica: Ok, right about now the turkey should be crispy on the outside, juicy on the inside. Why are we standing here?

Rachel: We're waiting for you to open the door. You got the keys.

Monica: No I don't.

Rachel: Yes, you do. When we left, you said, "got the keys."

Monica: No I didn't. I asked, "got the ke-eyes?"

Rachel: No, no, no, you said, "got the keys."

Chandler: Do either of you have the keys?

By saying "got the keys?", Monica actually wants to remind Rachel of bringing the key or to confirm that Rachel has brought the key. But Rachel

thought what she heard is that Monica has got the keys, so she doesn't need to bring the keys. The loss of illocutionary act leads to the result that all the guys are locked outside the door which brings the audience laughter.

(Scene in *Love Apartment*: Nuolan is going to America for study on New Year's Eve and she wants to express her love to Xiaoxian.)

诺澜：说心里话，和你在一起很开心。如果条件允许的话，除了工作，我还有许多事情想和你做。

曾小贤：做什么？

诺澜：比如一起逛街，看电影，一起吃饭旅游，一起过圣诞节。还有其一看春晚。

曾小贤：这些偏私人了点吧？

诺澜：你知道我什么意思的？你怎么说？

曾小贤：对不起，我和大家有约定，不看春晚。

The humor generated in this conversation is through Zeng Xiaoxian's violation of Quantity maxim. Quantity maxim requires the listeners make their contribution as informative as is required and not make contribution more informative than is required. That is to say, in the conversation, what the other person asks or expects you to say, you should say as much as you know, but should not say what he doesn't ask or expect you to do [11]. Nuolan's locutionary act is inviting Zeng Xiaoxian to do something together such as going shopping, watching movies, having dinner and travelling and so on. She wants to give hints to the Zeng Xiaoxian a hint that she likes him and she wants to know whether he likes her or not. However, Zeng Xiaoxian could not understand the implications of Nuolan's answer which is an implicit confession. Zeng Xiaoxian violates quantity maxim and only refuses to watch the Spring Festival entertainment together. All he concerns is that he has a promise with others that no one could watch the Spring Festival entertainment alone. Therefore, he responds that he could not watch TV because he promised others that he would not watch it alone.

English is an intonation language, and the intonation functions at the level of English phrases and utterances (or discourse), not at the lexical level as in Chinese. It has been acknowledged that intonation is central to help the speaker convey meaning effectively in oral English. In *Friends*, the loss of the illocutionary speech act is caused by the tone of the sentence. The meaning of intonation is important since a particular tone always bears a certain meaning. In *Love Apartment*, the listener could not interpret the intention of the speaker because the implicature of the utterance is ignored or partially highlighted.

### Misunderstanding of the illocutionary act

(Scene in *Friends*: Monica and Rachel used to be roommates. After Monica decides to live together with Chandler, Rachel is leaving that room.)

Monica: You're not packed even a little bit!

Rachel: Surprise!

Monica: What?

In this conversation, Monica is the speaker and Rachel is the listener. Monica returns home from outside, and she finds her room still messy and disordered because Rachel forgets to pack up her packages. By saying "You are not packed even a little bit!", the speaker (Monica) shows her complaint and criticism to the listener (Rachel). As a matter of fact, the listener has already understood the intention of the speaker and the context but the listener doesn't reply directly to the speaker either complete the illocutionary act which is to pack up her packages. The listener uses a euphemistic way to express her unwillingness of packing up and moving out. From the perspective of speech act theory, the listener pretends not knowing the context and subjectively shuns the speaker's intention and misrepresents the speaker's external behavior, thus producing a good humorous effect [12].

(Scene in *Love Apartment*: after Zhang Wei's case for Qiye to get back the property of his house from his son)

张伟：七爷

七爷：张律师，请坐

张伟：你怎么来这了？

七爷：不是你请我来的吗？

张伟：有吗？

七爷：昨天休庭之后，你说，你不会丢下我不管的，对不对？

Qiye was forced to leave his own house because his son wants to get rid of him then takes the house away from him so he has nowhere to stay. In the course, Zhangwei told the old man that he would never leave him alone. As a lawyer, Zhangwei's promises that he will never give up this case until Qiye gets back his house. However, Qiye misunderstands what Zhangwei means and thinks that Zhangwei will provide him a place to live so he comes to Zhangwei's apartment to live together with Zhangwei. This misunderstanding makes Zhangwei confused and then humor occurs.

As for this pattern in these two sitcoms, both are caused by the intentional misinterpretation of the speaker's expectation, but in *Friends* it is intentional, while in *Love Apartment* it is one perspective to interpret the utterance.

### THE REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES

According to Hall [13], he classified two different kinds of culture in regard to communication:

the high-context culture and the low-context culture depending on the degree to which meaning comes from the settings or from the words being exchanged. A high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message. A low-context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of information is vested in the explicit code [13]. Chinese culture is typical high-context culture which is characterized by less information in the coded speech but rich implicit information contained in context [14]. Both speaker and listener should have a shared background knowledge. By contrast, low-context culture is characterized by rich information coded in the explicit speech in the communication process. People in this culture emphasize the "content" instead of "context". English culture is such kind of culture and most information is conveyed by verbal message and very little is embedded in the context. Detailed background information is needed during interaction. Therefore, the patterns of the loss of the illocutionary speech act in these two sitcoms are different. It is widely known that Chinese emphasizes parataxis while English emphasizes hypotaxis. In Chinese, the grammar rules can be ignored if the meaning is accurately expressed but the ambiguity is easily caused during communication. By contrast, English pays more attention to the grammar rules so the content can be expressed more clearly and the tone of English can carry more information, therefore, the emphasis and misunderstanding of the illocutionary act is achieved differently in *Friends* and *Love Apartment*.

### CONCLUSION

In *Friends* and *Love Apartment*, humor is generated in the following three ways, that is emphasis, loss and misunderstanding of the illocutionary speech act. Under the theoretical framework of speech act theory, this study analyzes the difference in humor generation of the two famous sitcoms. Audience could have a good interpretation of the sitcoms and the two different cultures. Although the humorous speeches in the sitcoms are exaggerated in contrast to daily ones, the characteristics of the language and culture are highlighted. Therefore, for the language users, the following aspects should be noted. Firstly, the intonation of English carries information in the speech, so the intonation should be understood correctly during communication. Secondly, different from Chinese culture, English culture is a low-context one which focuses on the language itself. Therefore, detailed background information should be provided directly in the language so that the listeners could have a good interpretation of the speech and avoid misunderstandings caused by loss of the background information contained in the context.

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