

Contextual dimensions in interactional humour: How humour is practiced in selected American and Chinese situation comedies



Zhen Xu *

Fudan University, No. 220 Han Dan Road, Shanghai 200433, China

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Abstract

Situation comedies are a form of performing arts deliberately created to arouse laughter in the audience. As such, they serve as a rich corpus for the linguistic analysis of interpersonal and interactional humour. The effectiveness of interactional humour is strongly dependent on the context in which intended meanings are exchanged and understood. In this paper, I develop a framework of contextual dimensions (physical, temporal and experiential) which is used to describe how humour is communicated in social interactions. An analysis is conducted to study the mechanisms of humour embedded in interpersonal interactions in the American situation comedy “Friends” and the Chinese situation comedy “I Love My Family”. The results of the analysis show that the frequency of humour is just under 50% in both sitcoms, bearing a remarkable consistency. Overall, “Friends” is found to be more palatable to an international audience compared to “I Love My Family”. The greater utilization of the temporal contextual dimension and the lesser utilization of the experiential contextual dimension for “Friends” compared to “I Love My Family” means that the former depends more on linguistic and logical elements and less on social and cultural knowledge in order to achieve the humorous effects.

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1. Introduction

The English term “humour” is derived from humoral medicine of the ancient Greeks, which taught that the balance of fluids in the human body, known as “humours”, control human health and emotion (Martin, 2007). Humour has been found to serve a number of social, emotional, and cognitive functions, making it a worthwhile and rewarding subject matter for scientific research (Eckardt, 1991; Kotthoff, 2006; Martin, 2007). Indeed, the concept of humour is a complex subject matter, and it continues to attract significant research attention from multidisciplinary perspectives. Recent contributions have come from such diverse areas as anthropology, linguistics, psychology, semiotics and sociology, to name just a few (Weisfeld, 1993; Berger, 1999; Crawford, 2003; Kotthoff, 2006; Popa and Attardo, 2007; Martin, 2007; Dubinsky and Holcomb, 2011). Through these studies, researchers attempt to discover how humour is constructed, projected, received and understood in the interaction of sentient beings.

Humorous encounters most often involve the participation of multiple interactants, where it is projected by certain interactant(s) and received by others. Hence, it is apparent that humour cannot be understood monadically – that is, by studying one person. Rather, it has to be understood dyadically where people are influencing each other. Consequently,

* Tel.: +86 13636411238.

E-mail address: traceyxz@fudan.edu.cn.

the move is from intrapsychic to interpersonal explanations in the understanding of humour as an anthropological phenomenon (Chapman and Foot, 1995; Gruner, 1999; Hay, 2000; Morrison, 2012).

Situation comedies, often shortened to sitcoms, belong to a genre of comedy that features characters sharing the same common environment, such as a home or workplace, accompanied with jokes as part of the dialogue (Molon et al., 2005; Sedita, 2005; Li, 2010). Such programs originated in radio, but today, sitcoms are found almost exclusively on television as one of its dominant narrative forms. As situation comedies are a form of performing arts deliberately created to arouse laughter in the audience, they serve as a rich corpus for the analysis of interpersonal and interactional humour from a psycholinguistic perspective (Molon et al., 2005; Zhu, 2009). In this paper, I examine the role of context on the communication of humour in the American situation comedy “Friends” and the Chinese situation comedy “I Love My Family”. I will describe context in terms of three unique dimensional constituents – physical, temporal and experiential. I will compare the relative usage of these contextual dimensions in the two situation comedies, which were created under significantly different cultural and linguistic settings, and study how this affects the mode and effectiveness of the humour delivery.

2. Context in interactions

“Context” is commonly defined as a series of factors that contribute to the reconstruction of the intended meaning in a communicative exchange (Sommers, 2011; Taguchi, 2012). As such, humorous encounters depend heavily on context for the successful achievement of their intended effects.

Grice (1975) pointed out that in language use, some content cannot directly be transmitted by words, but is implied by what the speaker utters. He argued that on some occasions, particular contextual features help the listener to reconstruct the speaker’s communicative intention: “To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present, the hearer will reply on the following data: . . . the context, linguistic or otherwise, of the utterance. . . (Grice, 1975, p. 50)”. Thus, in case of doubt, context makes clear to the listener the meanings an utterance was intended to convey. In particular, Grice considered that an agent could rely on both the linguistic and the extralinguistic context in comprehending conversational implicatures.

Ellis and Roberts (1987) described context in a way that distinguished between context effects of linguistic structure and context effects of situation. Context can be seen as a factor that constrains the speaker’s choices for production or as one that constrains the listener’s choices for interpretation.

It is widely accepted that context is not a homogenous concept, but is rather heterogeneous in nature and almost impossible to delimit (Fetzer, 2008). For the purpose of analysis, Fetzer (2004) proposed to decompose context along function-based and discourse-anchored lines into the categories of linguistic context, cognitive context, social context and sociocultural context.

Linguistic context essentially comprises a communicative contribution’s adjacent communicative contribution (Fetzer, 2002). Cognitive context denotes a set of mental representations, propositions, contextual assumptions which may vary in strength, as well as factual assumptions (Fetzer, 2002). Social context is frequently used synonymously with extralinguistic context which comprises the co-participants, their physical and psychological dispositions and the specific and general background knowledge (Fetzer, 2002). Social context is further subcategorized into different types of sociocultural context which are defined by a particular perspective on social context in general (Fetzer, 2002).

Another recent approach to decompose context was proposed by Bosco et al. (2004), who described context in terms physical and social dimensions each comprising of a taxonomy of categories that contribute to the reconstruction of the speaker’s communicative intentions. The authors identified Access, Space, Time in the physical dimension, and Discourse, Move, and Status in the social dimension as the fundamental categories of context.

There are clear relationships between Bosco et al.’s decomposition of context and that of Fetzer. For example, the category Discourse identified by Bosco et al. (2004) belongs to Fetzer’s (2004) linguistic context, while Access, Space, Move and Status belong to the social context. The category Time is an interesting concept. Here, Time is defined as the temporal sequence of events by Bosco et al. (2004), rather than the absolute time. Whilst cast under the physical dimension by the authors, I believe it deserves special treatment as it is not something that can be physically sensed.

In the next chapter, I will attempt to unify these various approaches to the decomposition of context by building upon the concept of “dimensions” introduced by Bosco. My approach provides a simplified and robust framework for the analysis of interactive humour. In the following chapters, this framework is used to study the role of context and how it influences the way humour is projected and received in sitcoms created in both the USA and China.

3. Contextual dimensions

In this framework, I adopt the terminology used by Bosco et al. and define context in terms of its “dimensions”, which are aspects of context that are mutually orthogonal. Whereas Bosco et al. identified two dimensions – physical and social, I have formulated three dimensions of context, which are physical, temporal, and experiential. I believe that decomposing

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