

Humor in Discourse: A Linguistic Study of the Chinese Dialect Film, *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头)

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This paper is a corpus study on humor in discourse of the film, *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头). Three levels of humor are examined. The first level is strictly linguistic in the study of humor. The second level is from the societal perspective. The third level is the interaction between language and the socio-political context. According to these three levels, three basic findings are (1) the linguistic devices used for creating humorous effect in verbal interactions include phonetic, lexical and discourse devices, (2) irony to current societal situation in China results from the social interactions among interlocutors, and (3) language choice and language form as dialects which contrast with standard and connection with local culture in the socio-political context of modern China are used to create humor.

1. Introduction

Humor is an important tool to achieve certain purposes. Humor is at first a type of language behavior. Attardo defines humor by two criteria (Attardo 2003). The first one is whether the event elicits laughter or smiling. The second one is whether it was produced with the intention of eliciting laughter or smiling.

Even though humor, as a linguistic and interactional process, appears to be a universal human phenomenon, it is more obviously embedded in situated sociocultural context than most other communication. Discourse analysis has recently begun to explore humor in discourse from both the linguistic and socio-cultural perspective. In western context, an approach to humor grounded in interactional sociolinguistics starts not with reified abstractions such as “humor”, “wit”, or “irony”, but rather with the situated interpretation of humor as a speech activity (Davies 2003). However, in the Chinese sociocultural context, there is not as much linguistic data for analyzing humor as in the western context (Chan 2006).

Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997) analyzed different types of humor in conversational joking, such as teasing, joking about others and self-denigrating. In their article they raised one main question, namely, what are the functions and outcomes of verbal interactions and social interactions that involve conversational joking. Based on their question, three levels of questions are developed to examine humor in discourse in the analysis of the film, *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头). The first level is strictly linguistic in the study of humor. The second level is from the societal perspective. The third level is the

interaction between language and the socio-political context. With respect to the three levels, three questions are posed. (1) What linguistic devices are used for creating humorous effect in verbal interactions? (2) What humorous effects result from the social interactions between (or among) the interlocutors? And (3) how does the script writer or director manipulate language choice and language form in the socio-political context of modern China to create humor?

2. Methodology

2.1 Data

The data of this study is a DVD version of *Crazy Stone* (疯狂的石头), which was released by China Film Group & Warner & Hengdian Film Company (中影华纳横店影视有限公司) in 2006.

The film *Crazy Stone* is made in 2005, directed by a young Chinese director Ning Hao (宁浩). Film setting is in current Chongqing, China, and the film duration is 100 minutes and 26 seconds.

The story is set in the current situation in Chongqing. A valuable jade is discovered in a factory which is going bankrupt. The factory director decides to hold an exhibition of this jade in order to save the factory. He sends two guards, Bao Shihong (包世宏) and San Bao (三宝) to guarantee the safety of the jade. Meanwhile, there are three groups of people who want to steal this jade. One is Xie Xiaomeng (谢晓盟), the son of the factory director, who wants to get the jade in order to pursue a girl. The second is a group of thieves, who are “professional”, while the third is an “international academic” thief, Mike (麦克), who is a Cantonese. The movie is mainly about these three groups of thieves trying to steal one jade in an exhibition, while two guards take measures to stop them. After a series of coincidences, finally a good girl, who is the girlfriend of the protagonist Bao Shihong (包世宏), gets the jade unexpectedly.

This film impressed numerous people in Mainland China. On the one hand, some film critics of Mainland China consider it as “black humor” and reflecting “ridiculous reality”, which means the scenes and the plot in this film not only reflects but also satirizes some current social and cultural problems of China through comedy. This method, namely, using comedy to satirize current situations, definitely intensify the degree of irony in this film. On the other hand, besides the opinions of these critics, the audiences consider this film as humorous, which could make them laugh every five to ten minutes during the movie.

Last but not the least, the outstanding characteristic of this film is the use of all kinds of Chinese dialects, which is also an essential factor to create humor in this movie. In recent Mainland China, the films in which the characters use certain dialects to express certain purposes, such as using a dialect to resist the mainstream discourse, or using a dialect to reflect regional features, are quite popular. In *Crazy Stone*, the director also adopts dialects. Because the story in this film takes place in a big city of China,

Chongqing, the actors' line in this film is mainly in Chongqing dialect, such as the protagonists Bao Shihong (包世宏) and San Bao (三宝). Besides the dominant Chongqing dialect, other thieves in this movie use other dialects. For example, Brother Dao, the leader of the group thieves, speaks Tangshan dialect, which is a type of Hebei dialect. For example, here is a brief list for other dialects used in the movie.

- Beijing dialect: Spoken by Xiao Jun (小军)
- Qingdao dialect: Spoken by Hei Pi (黑皮)
- Tangshan dialect: Spoken by Brother Dao (道哥)
- Cantonese: Spoken by Mike (麦克)
- Chengdu dialect: Spoken by Secretary Qin (秦秘书)

There are three reasons why the film *Crazy Stone* is chosen. The first reason is it is a comedy. It is a feasible way to analyze humor in comedies. The second reason is this film is the most popular dialect film (so-called 方言电影 in Chinese) in China in 2006. The third reason is this film addresses social and political aspects of life in today's China through humor.

2.2 Analysis

In previous studies there are many researches which are based on text corpus or media corpus. This study takes an analytical of speaking approach to the data. The problem for analyzing the humor in a film is that it is difficult for the analyzer to decide whether the conversation is humorous or not, for the reason that the response of the audience is hidden and there is no concomitant laughter in the film. An online list contains most of the humorous conversations in this film, which is picked out and decided by the audience. This list is a representative of most audience's opinion towards humor. Thus I follow this opinion to define humor in this film.

In discussing how humor is built up in the movie, first I analyze the linguistic devices which constitute humor. Then at the discourse level, I employ the approach of discourse analysis. I also examine two factors that are both deeply related to cultural background and essential to humor building up, that is, the irony and the use of dialects.

3. Humor in Three Levels

3.1 Linguistic Level

Although humor can be considered as the interaction between linguistic process and contextualized reality and highly depended on the situated context, first of all, it is a kind of speech activity. Linguistic devices, such as the vocalization, the lexis and the syntax, are the important factors that construct humor. I divide linguistic devices into four levels: humor at the phonetic level, humor at the lexical level, and humor at the discourse level.

3.1.1 Phonetic Devices

Humor at the phonetic level is based on the homophones, the laughter particle, and some vocalization.

(1) 派出所民警：这个事情，我们一定会查清楚。

Policeman: We will figure it out.

包世宏：查查查，擦皮鞋吗！

Bao Shihong: Figure it out...you are the people who brush shoes?

In (1), the homophones cha 查 and ca 擦 in Chongqing dialect raises the humorous effect. There is no difference between the sounds of cha 查 and ca 擦 in Chongqing dialect. Bao Shihong associates the vulgar thing “brush shoes” with the serious job of these police men, through the same sound of the two characters. The contradictory between “figure it out” and “brush shoes” bring out humor.

Another strategy found to creating humor at the phonetic level is using dialect. The regular language in films or TV of Mainland China is the Standard Mandarin, which represent a serious and formal style. However, in recent years, a trend of using dialects in films or TV has become popular, which resists the dominant cultural discourse and conveys the tastes of ordinary people. Moreover, using dialects in films or TV and humor always take place simultaneously. According to this function of using dialect, it gradually becomes an important measure to achieve humorous purpose in films and TV.

By using phonetic devices, both the dialectal sounds contrasting with the pronunciations in Standard Mandarin and the laughter particles are the main trigger of humor.

(2) 包世宏：就这么搞，就这么搞！

Bao Shihong: This is how we do it!

In (2), jiu 就 and zhe 这 are pronounced as [tɔu3] and [lɔŋ3], which is quite different from the Standard Mandarin. The contradictory provides a vivid image of the ordinary people who experience his own life and do not care things which have no relationship with him.

3.1.2 Lexical Devices

Humor created by lexical devices includes words and phrases. Most humor is based on two strategies: using word substitution and using vernacular dialectal slangs. Word substitution indicates that changing certain words in an established sentence in order to provide humor.

- (3) 谢晓盟: 翡翠代表我的心.
Xie Xiaomeng: This jade represents my heart.
女孩: 花心.
The girl: Playboy.

There are a series of word substitution in (3). First, Xie Xiaomeng changes the word 月亮 “the moon” in the set phrase 月亮代表我的心 “the moon represents my heart”. Then according to this change, the girl responds by changing another word 心 “heart” in this set phrase as 花心 “flower heart” which means the person is a playboy in Chinese. The similarity in the form but different meanings of the two sentences “the moon represents my heart” and “the jade represents my heart” elicits smiles.

- (4) 谢晓盟: 与爹地斗, 其乐无穷啊!
Xie Xiaomeng: It's funny to fight with your father.
(5) 朋友: 搞定没?
Friend: Have you done?
谢晓盟: 要浪漫, 先浪费嘛!
Xie Xiaomeng: To be romantic, be extravagant fist!

In (5), the same strategy is used to create humor. 浪漫 “romantic” and 浪费 “extravagant” have the similar form but unrelated meanings. Through combining them together into one sentence, the discrepancy between the two words are more obvious, making this sentence humorous.

- (6) 包世宏: 敢在太岁爷头上动土!
Bao Shihong: You dare to touch the soil on the head of the God!
三宝: 是太岁爷脑壳上.
San Bao: It's on the “nao ke” of the God!
包世宏: 是你脑壳上!
Bao Shihong: It's on your “nao ke”!

Example (6) has already contains the strategy of using dialectal words. Using 脑壳 instead of 头 “the head” increase the humorous effect. In dialect-used film, vernacular dialectal slangs are important linguistic devices for rendering humor at the lexical level. For example:

- (7) 麦克: 我顶你个肺!
Mike: Demit!
- (8) 黑皮: 我都不稀说你!
Heipi: I don't even want to criticize you!
- (9) 包世宏: 你娘!
Bao Shihong: Your mother!

The three examples are all dialectal slang of certain regions. (7) is in Cantonese, (8) is in Shanxi dialect and (9) is in Chongqing dialect. They are also the spoken tags for each character in the movie, which are considered as the symbols of characters. Each of the three has its regional characteristic. When the characteristic is related to a specific cultural and the image of regional people, the audience will feel humorous.

3.1.3 Discourse Devices

Discourse devices are rendered in the interaction between the initial sentence and the response to this initiation. Moreover, humor at the discourse level is extremely depended on the context. The approach to examine humor at the discourse level is to examine how one character initiates a discourse and how another character responds to it and to examine the context in which this conversation takes place.

- (10) 小军: 道哥你看, 这个真厉害, 简直就是007!
Xiao Jun: See, Brother Dao, it's smart! Like 007!
道哥: 007...还008呢!
Brother Dao: 007...It's more like 008!

In (10), when Xiao Jun opens Mike's box and see all kinds of professional tools for stealing, he says the box is really like the one belongs to 007. Brother Dao responds by modifying Xiao Jun's term 007 to 008, which indicates that he is laughing at Xiao Jun for his limitation.

- (11) 包世宏: 在我这里, 就值四千八。
Bao Shihong: It's only worth four thousand and eight hundred yuan.
三宝: 我给你八千四, 你把它给我吧!
San Bao: Give it to me! I will give you eight thousand and four hundred yuan!

In (11), the different attitudes towards this precious stone between Bao Shihong and San Bao are presented by the contrast 四千八 “four thousand and eight hundred” and

八千四 “eight thousand and four hundred”. However, the fact is that even San Bao’s gives Bao Shihong 八千四 “eight thousand and four hundred”, Bao Shihong still won’t sell this stone to him. After Bao Shihong denigrated the value of this stone, San Bao actually was teasing him by use the strategy of self-denigrating.

3.2 Societal Perspective

In this movie, there are two essential factors in constructing humor. One is irony or satire which is a response to current social and economical situations; another is the use of dialect. The two factors are almost contained in every humorous conversation in the movie. They are the main strategies the director uses to achieve humorous effect and to express critical views towards current social reality.

Irony in the movie can be divided into two categories according to its content. The first category is using irony to satirize the so-called popular culture and modern artists in the society.

- (12) 谢晓盟: 每当我从这个角度看这个城市的时候, 我就强烈地感觉到, 城市是母体, 而我们是生活在她的子宫里面...

Xie Xiaomeng: Every time when I see our city from this perspective, I strongly feel that it’s like the mother’s body, while we are in her venter...

- (13) 谢晓盟: 杀人不见血...在创作这部作品的时候, 有时候真的感觉到, 美像一把利刃一样, 瞬间把我的心灵穿透了...

Xie Xiaomeng: Kill a man without seeing blood...During the period that I create this work, sometimes I really feel that beauty is a sword, which pierces my heart suddenly...

In (12) and (13), the irony is used to satirize the so-called modern artists. The term “the body” and “the beauty”, and the metaphors “the city is like mother’s body” and “beauty is a sword” make these sentences sound like produced by a modern artist, who has a specific modernism or even postmodernism perspective. However, these expressions come from a little scoundrel, Xie Xiaomeng, who has little art education background. The elimination of the boundary between an elegant modern artist and an illiteracy youth shows the audience an irony, that is, the appearance of art, without its essence can be acquired through popular culture and also be used as a symbol of literacy.

Another category of irony in the movie is using irony to reflect the reality, namely, the social and economical problems which the director observes in current China. In the political and ideology context, these problems could only be implied through irony in a comedy.

- (14) 秦秘书: 老谢, 八个月都没发工资了, 搞得有声有色的嘛! 要我说啊, 早点喊大家下岗, 这个才是做善事, 早死早超生呀.

Secretary Qin: Lao Xie, you haven't paid your employees for eight months. You did a good job! ...In my opinion, I would have done a good deed if I had fired all of them. The sooner they die, the sooner they go to the heaven!

In (14), the way for this factory to get rid of the pain caused by the economic development of China is to get rid of the employees; the situation here is already very ironic. However, the more ironic thing is that though we can understand the purpose of getting rid of workers is to save this factory, for the workers in this factory, even losing their job is better than receiving no pay for eight months. It has not achieved its purpose and is ridiculed by the people

- (15) 黑皮: 这纯属道德问题.

Heipi: It's only a moral problem.

道哥: 黑皮, 还是你说得对啊, 道德...

Brother Dao: Heipi, you are right, it's a moral problem...

黑皮: 节哀顺变, 大哥.

Heipi: Take care, Brother.

Example (15) implies another social problem in current China. Some critics argue that there is a tendency in China that the moral standard of Chinese people is declining, due to the growth of mammonism and the implemental orientation. In (15) Brother Dao is crying for the loss of morality, which seems ironic because Brother Dao himself is a thief who lacks basic moral.

3.3 Interaction Between Language And the Socio-political Context

Dialect using also plays an important role in creating humor in this movie. The first role is contrasting with standard. Dialects are vernacular languages and considered as informal. The default language in films or TV in Mainland China is the Standard Mandarin, which represent a serious and formal style. The contrast between dialects and the Standard Chinese can easily bring a sense of humor. When the characters use their dialects in a particular context, even just their own spoken tags, these usages can achieve humorous affects. The second role is conveying underlying messages. The director of this film tries to resist the standard political discourse of China in an alternative way and to convey the voice of the masses. Thus we can say that dialect using in *Crazy Stone* indicates that the director tries to resist the standard, the dominant political or cultural discourse in China by deconstructing the respectability, solemnity and seriousness of Chinese films, and also conveys the tastes of ordinary people, such as their complain

about the government, their observations towards all kinds of social problems. The third role is associating with local cultures. The background of this dialectal region and culture is significant to the perception of humor. The knowledge about the dialect and the imagination of the regional people will influence the humorous effect aroused by the dialect. Besides the examples that are given in humor using phonetic devices and lexical devices, there are more examples:

(16) 黑皮: 咱还费那事干嘛!

Heipi: Why do we do this to waste our energy?

(17) 三宝: 抽奖开始了.

San Bao: The lottery prize begins!

包世宏: 你要是能中奖, 老子就光起屁股在解放碑跑三圈!

Bao Shihong: I will run three circles around Jiefang Stele without having pant if you get the prize!

All the humorous effects in these examples have relationship with using dialect. In (16) Heipi speaks in Shanxi dialect. In (17) Bao Shihong not only uses Chongqing dialect but also mentions a symbolic sculpture in Chongqing, Jiefang Stele.

(18) 谢厂长: 两百多个职工全靠你了! 关键时刻, 你可不要拉稀摆带啊!

Factory Chief Xie: Two hundred works all rely on you! At this particular moment, you should not have mistakes!

(19) 包世宏: 小船要过千番浪, 大水不淹一家人, 袍哥从不拉稀摆带!

Bao Shihong: Tiny boat needs to overcome thousands of waves, while the flood ever submerges its relatives. The brothers never betray their brotherhood!

Here the word “la xi bai dai 拉稀摆带” actually came out from the culture of a kind of brotherhood organization in Sichuan history from Qing dynasty, called “ge lao hui 哥老会.” The members in this organization referred themselves as “pao ge 袍哥,” and “la xi bai dai 拉稀摆带,” means never break any promise. Then this kind of language remained in Sichuan and Chongqing people’s daily use. So for dialect using, the background of this dialectal region and culture is significant to the perception of humor. The knowledge about the dialect and the imagination of the regional people will influence the humorous effect aroused by the dialect.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I examine the humor in the film *Crazy Stone* from three levels, namely, the linguistic level, the societal perspective and the interaction between language

and the socio-political context. The linguistic devices used for creating humorous effect in verbal interactions include phonetic, lexical and discourse devices. Irony to current societal situation in China results from the social interactions among interlocutors. Language choice and language form as dialects which contrast with standard and connection with local culture in the socio-political context of modern China are used to create humor.

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