

## The Comprehension of Humour in Indirect Speech Acts with Frame-Shifting Theory

LIU Xiangnan<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup>Lecturer, Basic Teaching Department, Changchun University of Architecture, Changchun, China.

\*Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Being a common type of language behavior in human being's society, humour plays an essential role in human life, especially in communication. If the hearer is lacking in linguistic competence, the transmission of information will be hindered, and the speaker's meaning will be misinterpreted or twisted. Most of the humours are generated or produced by unsmooth information exchanged from the speaker, which is intentional or unintentional. Humour generation process is the process of proposing and creating a framework consciously, and then activating the elements associated with another framework and confirming the identified information through transferring to another frame. So that Frame-shifting Theory is very necessary when comprehending the process of humour generation. The writer lists some humours examples existing in Indirect Speech Acts in the paper, which focus on how the hearer comprehends the humour with the Frame-shifting Theory.

**Key words:** Humor; Indirect speech acts; Frame-shifting theory

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### INTRODUCTION

If the humor in Indirect Speech Acts can not be understood or comprehended well by hearer, it will be meaningless

and may even cause some misunderstanding. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary whether the hearer could get the humor meaning and comprehend and appreciate the verbal humour.

### 1. INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

J. L. Austin put forward Speech act theory in 1962, people speak at the same time the implementation of the three acts: locutionary act, illocutionary acts and perlocutionary act. Locutionary act refers to "speak" the act itself. This behavior does not constitute a language communication, but in the process of implementation of that act, the speaker not only makes an illocutionary act, but also a perlocutionary act. The illocutionary act is to "speak" this action for some purposes, such as the transmission of information, greetings, issue commands, the threat of intimidation, and so on. Perlocutionary act refers to the consequences or impacts on the hearer, which means that the speaker's words may have an effect on the hearer's thoughts, feelings and behaviors (Austin, 1962). What the researcher is interested in most is perlocutionary act, because it involves the intention of the speaker, which is the topic of communication in language.

As to Speech act theory, both sides in communication must have the linguistic competence and pragmatic competence, in that way will the information be transmitted and received to make communication smooth. If the hearer lacks one competence, especially when his linguistic competence is not enough, the transmission of information will be hindered, and the speaker's meaning will be misinterpreted or twisted. Most of the humors are generated or produced by unsmooth information exchanged from the speaker, which is intentional or unintentional.

Searle (1975) made revision and development of speech act theory. According to their hypothesis, when people speak, they are implementing a certain behavior, such as speech behavior and intentional behavior.

Meanwhile, he needs a certain convention when a person use words to express some aims, but when he violates convention and turns to use unusual language to express his intention, Indirect Speech Acts occurs. He pointed out that the indirect speech act would solve the problems that how the speaker expresses his intentional meaning by his common words indirectly or how the hearer infer the intentional meaning from the literal meaning of the speaker.

The creation and perception of verbal humor mainly depend on both emotional and cognitive sides. Now let me introduce an important and common theory on comprehending and appreciating humor.

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## 2. FRAME-SHIFTING THEORY

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### 2.1 The Definition of Frame-Shifting Theory

Frame--shifting Theory, which is usually used to explain the generative mechanism of humor, is put forward by Coulson. The frame-shifting is conceptual revision which illustrates the operation of the semantic reanalysis process, which reorganizes the existing information (elements in the message-level representation) into a new frame. Coulson (2001) believes humor generation process is the process of proposing and creating a framework consciously, and then activating the elements associated with another framework and confirming the identified information through transferring to another frame. Framework transfer is done by the reanalysis of the humor in pragmatics and semantics, and then restructuring discourse to characterize the present various elements to establish mapping between the old and the new framework for the corresponding structure by activating background knowledge (Coulson, 2001). When interpreting some activity, people construct some possibilities in one's brain frame from background knowledge and make inferences which are not available at once. The previous researchers thought that process of restructuring a new frame requires an ability to make dynamic inference. People often need to connect seemingly disparate events and actions. If the event is related to people, understanding event need for consider one's goals and motives. One way of utilizing frames in models of language comprehension is to equate inference with the instantiation of a frame by binding slots to particular elements accessible from discourse and/or contextual information (Coulson, 1997).

### 2.2 The Use of Frame-Shifting Theory

Coulson (2001) considers that knowledge frame is a very important element to generate humors. When we try to thoroughly understand a humor, besides sufficient understanding the existing information, we also need the abilities to use the existing information to make an analysis of its implied meaning or changing meaning to infer the final meaning at last. We could use Frame--shifting theory to explain the cognitive processes of these humors.

Besides what we said above, she also considers that the generative mechanism of humor is putting forward and creating a new frame consciously, then use it to activate other elements, which are related with another frame, the final aim is to adjust the confirmed information from its former format to the latter format. Through reanalysis of the statements and semantics, reorder of the existing elements, as well as stimulating the background information, Frame—Shifting will eventually be realized.

The points discussed above show that meaning construction, to a large extent, depends on background knowledge and contextual information. The fact that meaning requires an appeal to background knowledge suggests that language efficiently cues the retrieval of background knowledge from long-term memory in a way which is congruous with the current context as well as the communicative and interactive goals of the speakers (interlocutors) involved (Coulson, 1997). Frame-shifting is an effective way to explore on-line meaning construction in which background knowledge and contextual information each plays a critical role. The process of frame-shifting depends immensely on background knowledge and contextual information. The flexibility of the interpretation of humor is perhaps the most common than in verbal humors.

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## 3. THE APPLICATION OF FRAME-SHIFTING THEORY TO INDIRECT SPEECH ACTS

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Frame-shifting is one method of meaning construction. It is semantic reorganization that occurs when subsequent information is inconsistent with an initial interpretation.

### Example 1

Mark was putting flowers on his grandmother's grave when he noticed a man nearby, in front of a tombstone. The man was on his knees, rocking back and forth, tears streaming down his cheeks, moaning softly, "Why did you die? Why did you die?" over and over again. Mark was infected by his emotion at the sight and went over to the poor man to console him. "Why did you die?" again and again. Mark put his arm around the man and half whispered to him, "My grandmother is buried just over there. Is a loved one of yours buried here?" The man sniffled: "It's my wife's first husband."

Then let us make an analysis of this dialogue, why men repeatedly cried, "Why did you die?" By Humorous quip we know "you" refers to his wife's ex-husband, and the illocutionary meaning of the Mark is: How good it is if you are alive! If you had not been dead, I would not have got married to your ex-wife and I would not have to endure this great suffering. The man uses an interrogative sentence to make a statement of a fact: You are dead, so I am married to your ex-wife with pain and pressure. This is an indirect speech act. The agentive act of the man's

complaining is the expression of remorse. Perlocutionary act aims at making people feel compassion for the man suffered from unhappy marriage. The reader starts the conventional cognitive frame at first: a man was on his knees, rocking back and forth, tears streaming down his cheeks, moaning softly, “Why did you die?” Judging from the behaviors and words of the man, he was likely to mourn over the loss of his relative.

But if the reader kept reading, he will find the metonymy in the man’s words, the reader would realize that the man was not mourning over any relatives of him, but mourned over his wife’s ex-husband, so much for that, when humor generates.

In this example, it was clear that the original mind-frame clashed with the new information, so it made the reader have to give up the conventional frame and turned to start a new frame, which must match with the new input information. Then the brain needed to identify the former original information again through the integration of concept and combination with social knowledge, after the integration process, the reader suddenly was enlightened with the real feeling the man wanted to express, that is, in fact, the man fully suffered from his unfortunate marriage and couldn’t find a place to talk, so he went to the cemetery of his wife’s ex-husband to complain about his unfortunate and poor, and that behavior was absolutely ridiculous.

The man used the metonymy—interrogative sentence to state an objective fact: Due to your death, I married your ex-wife and now I have to suffer a lot. In fact, it is an implicit behavior. The behavior of his crying is to express his regret, which makes other people show sympathy for his unfortunate marriage. In this example, the man used unusual sentences to reveal his sad and complex mental activity. It is clear that if the man used a declarative sentence to express, it won’t have such an impressive effect.

#### Example 2

(On a train, a man had just put a heavy box somewhere above a lady’s head)

Lady: Sir, **what if the box drops down?**

Man: Don’t worry, madam. There aren’t any breakable inside.

Then let us make an analysis of this talk, in this humor, the real intention of the woman was to remind the man if the box dropped down, it would hurt somebody, she advised the man to place it in a safe place, but from the answer of the man, we could know that he understood the intention of the woman was to remind him of taking good care of the goods in his box, if the box dropped down, the goods in the box would be broken, so he gave the lady an unexpected answer “There aren’t any breakable inside”. The lack of language application ability for the man led to his misunderstanding of the real intention of the woman, and it induces humor.

Obviously, the lady replaced an imperative sentence with an interrogative sentence, which is an indirect speech

act. In the conversation, what the lady expected was that thank you, I would put it in a suitable place. So when she received the unexpected answer, she would be very surprised. And then she had to give up the current frame and started a few frames according to the background information, at that time, many related elements were activated. The lady would be aware that the man thought she was concerned about his box for him, and then the incongruity is solved.

Example 3—All the cigarettes will be on fire sooner or later

Mary was so disgusted at her husband’s cigarette smoking that she complained to him one day.

“I hope that all the cigarette factories will catch fire someday.” Mary said.

“Don’t worry, dear. All the cigarettes will be on fire sooner or later.” He said with a smile.

Now let us appreciate and make an analysis of the talk between Mary and her husband, from the background information, we could know that Mary couldn’t bear her husband smoking, so when she said “I hope that all the cigarette factories will catch fire someday” to his husband, her real intention was to show her hatred to cigarette and her anger to his husband. But the answer of Mary’s husband “All the cigarettes will be on fire sooner or later” is surprising. It is clear that what her husband wanted to express was that he believed all the cigarettes would be smoked by chain smokers some day. He expressed his disagreement indirectly and in a humorous way. Here indirect speech act is used.

Similarly with example 2, the lack of language comprehensive ability of Mary’s husband made him misunderstood the real intention of Mary, and further on, it induces humor. The indirect speech act is the key to the humor generation, thus the wife has to change the current frame into a new one considering his answer from another perspective.

#### Example 4

A man went to the doctor complaining of insomnia. The doctor gave him a thorough examination, found absolutely nothing physically wrong with him, and then told him “Listen, if you ever expect to cure your insomnia, you just have to stop taking your **troubles** to bed with you.”

“I know,” said the man, “but I can’t. My **wife** refuses to sleep alone.”

(<http://gb.cri.cn/33160/2010/03/11/4985s2781373.htm>)

The doctor advised the man not to take the trouble to his bed, in that way, he could relieve even cure his insomnia. However, to one’s surprise, the man replied that, he can’t, because his wife refuses to sleep alone. At the beginning, the man’s words were confusing, for we know that troubles refer to the displeased or pressure from life or work. How can it be related to his wife? And then we had to change another frame to understand it, he had to

sleep together with his wife, for that reason he must take troubles to sleep with him and he can't get rid of it. In fact, we can infer that his wife often caused some troubles to him. The man expressed his idea in an indirect way, which seemed more polite and much better.

#### Example 5

A new restaurant opened in our town, so my husband, Walter, and I decided to try it. As the waitress took our order, Walter asked if the coffee was fresh. "**I'm sure it is,**" answered the waitress. "**We've only been open for two weeks.**" (<http://gb.cri.cn/33160/2010/03/11/4985s2781373.htm>)

The waiter didn't answer the question directly, but said that the café has just been opened for two weeks, which means that the coffee must be very fresh. He replied in a quick-witted way to avoid the embarrassing and unnecessary question from the guest. The waiter was very brilliant. The guest's first reaction would be I knew that, it was no use telling me the truth, but he would have to give up this frame, and reconstruct a new frame that the waiter was reluctant to answer the questions like that, so he had to change another way to express that the café is new, so is the coffee. So we can see that from that example the indirect speech act is useful and practical in our daily life.

From the statements and examples above, we have known something about Indirect Speech Act. To sum up, in our daily life, Indirect Speech Acts usually represent the two following aspects:

On one hand, the indirection of language could prove the difference between linguistic form and linguistic function. We are all familiar that the basic functions of language determine it exists in the following three formats: declarative sentence, imperative sentence and interrogative sentence. Declarative sentence is used to describe; imperative sentence is used to make a request; interrogative sentence is used to ask a question. These three formats represent the typical usage of the basic

sentence patterns of language, but it doesn't mean different sentences must match with its functions strictly and absolutely, in other words, we could use declarative sentence to make a request, or we could use interrogative sentence to ask a question or describe a fact.

On the other hand, the indirection of language could also be showed by the difference between the literal meaning of language and the real meaning of language. It often happens when we adopt rhetorical device in our talk, such as irony, exaggeration, metaphor and so on.

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## CONCLUSION

As an important communication way, humour plays an important role in our daily life, while sometimes humour generation relies on Indirect Speech Act. We are able to express or refuse something indirectly by Indirect Speech Act, which is a good way of avoiding conflict and impoliteness and defending others' face and pride. At the same time, Frame-shifting theory is the key to comprehend the humour intention in conversation.

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