

An Analysis of Humor in Home with Kids from Perspective of Speech Act Theory

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Keywords: Humor, *Home with Kids*, Speech act theory

Abstract: *Home with Kids* is a family sitcom with ideal broadcast effect in China, and its humorous effects have attracted the attention of many scholars. Based on Austin's speech act theory, this paper explores the role of speech acts in the construction of humorous effects in the sitcom *Home with Kids*. It is found that the humor in this play is mainly caused by two speech acts. On the one hand, the literal meaning of the language itself, that is, the locutionary act, produces humor. On the other hand, illocutionary act, the misinterpretation or ignorance of the meaning of the language in a specific context or situation, can invisibly construct humorous effect. This study aims to broaden the research scope of speech act theory, test the practicality and feasibility of speech act theory for dynamic discourse. Meanwhile, it aids people to better understand the humorous effects generated in two speech acts, and helps them to better appreciate sitcom *Home with Kids*.

1. Introduction

Home with Kids is a domestic sitcom, which tells the story of a stepfamily. The protagonist Xia Donghai followed his ex-wife to the United States. After the divorce, he returned to China with his seven-year-old son named Xia Yu. Meanwhile, he reunited with a daughter named Xia Xue, who grew up in China. Later he met and married Liu Mei, who was a head nurse in a major hospital. Like Xia Donghai, Liu Mei also divorced. She lived with her son named Liu Xing. Xia Donghai and Liu Mei looked forward to integrating their love and wisdom to cultivate the consciousness of their children to live happily.

And three children living in the same family, although they have different blood relations and age levels, they also get along as if they were biological children. However, due to different environments in which the three grew up, they have very different personalities and hobbies, so disputes are inevitable. Sometimes the three work together to deal with their difficult parents, but sometimes they fight each other for their own rights. In a word, this TV play contains a hefty dose of comedy. The characters' language is humorous and witty. In addition, each character has their own unique personality. More importantly, the plot in it makes people cannot help laughing. Since its release in 2005, the series has been broadcast and even rebroadcast by many TV stations, and it is very popular with the audience.

Humor is a form of language in daily life, which often plays a unique role in people's daily life.^[1] People can communicate through language, and their skillful use of language produces humor,

which makes daily life interesting and plays a huge role in interpersonal communication. Meanwhile, humor has gained more and more attention of pragmatic scholars. As a sitcom, *Home with Kids* contains a lot of humorous plots, thus it has attracted a lot of pragmatic scholars to discuss it.

2. Previous Studies on Home with Kids

Home with Kids has exerted a great influence on TV drama market in China, so domestic scholars studied it from various aspects. For instance, humorous effect of *Home with Kids* was discussed from the perspective of violating the cooperative principle.^[2] Relevance theory was applied to analyzing the production process of humor in *Home with Kids*. Consequently, the close relationship between relevance theory and verbal humor was demonstrated.^[3] Additionally, the differences in verbal communication between *Home with Kids* and *Modern Family* were explored based on cultural dimension theory.^[4]

From the perspective of rhetoric theory, a study was conducted to make a comparative analysis of the figures of speech used in humorous words, by taking the English-Chinese sitcoms *Growing Pains* and *Home with Kids* as examples.^[5] Meanwhile, the ambiguity of dialogues in Chinese and American sitcoms *Home with Kids* and *Friends* was analyzed from three aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, so as to demonstrate the humorous charm of English and Chinese.^[6] Cultural dimension theory was regarded as the theoretical principle of *Home with Kids* and *Modern Family* to interpret the differences and causes of these differences between Chinese and American family education, hoping to provide some available suggestions for family education in China.^[7]

To sum up, many scholars have interpreted *Home with Kids* from different perspectives. And most of them have explored the humorous effect contained in it, mainly focusing on perspectives of the cooperative principle and relevance theory. However, a few studies focus on application of speech act theory in the analysis of humor in *Home with Kids*. Therefore, based on the speech act theory, this study is in-depth analysis of the dialogue in *Home with Kids*, aiming at understanding the internal relationship between speech acts and humor.

3. Speech Act Theory

3.1. Introduction of Speech Act Theory

The theory of speech act was first proposed by Austin, an English philosopher, and subsequently modified and developed by Searle, an American philosopher. According to the traditional view of language, language is different from behavior. In other words, language is a tool of thinking used only to express thoughts and abstract meanings. Austin, on the other hand, believed that human utterance not only provides information describing facts and states, but also performs some other actions. In other words, language use is not only a process of word formation and sentence making, but also a kind of behavior, that is, “words can act” or “speaking is doing”.^[8]

Speech acts were divided into three levels.^[9] They are locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Locutionary act refers to an act that constitutes speech itself but cannot constitute verbal communication. This level is concerned with the literal meaning of a speaker’s statement. Illocutionary act refers to an act performed by the act of speaking. While expressing the literal meaning, the statement also completes various actions, such as promise, expectation, approval, acknowledgement, apology, objection, renunciation, refusal, swearing, naming, sentencing, etc.^[8]

In other words, the speaker is also performing some other actions when speaking. Perlocutionary act refers to the influence of a speaker on the listener after he finishes his speech. That is, the

consequences of speaking, such as making the listener happy or angry, or making the listener do something. For example, the literal meaning of the sentence “I promise to buy a gift for my mom” is finished by the locutionary act, and the locutionary act is when the speaker says the sentence but also does something else, namely “promises to do something.” This is illocutionary force of this sentence. And “making listener be happy” is the consequence of this sentence, namely perlocutionary act.

The greatest significance of Austin’s speech act theory is that it closely combines the meaning with context of language. Therefore, under the guidance of Austin’s speech act theory, this study analyzes the verbal humor in *Home with Kids* mainly from two levels: locutionary act and illocutionary force of speech.

3.3. Analysis of Humor in *Home with Kids* from Perspective of Austin’s Speech Act Theory

3.3.1. Humor Produced by Locutionary Act Itself

Locutionary act itself is the study of meaningful linguistic units or concepts, commonly referred to as literal meaning.^[8] The fact that the locutionary act itself produces humor means that sometimes humor is produced unconsciously by the speaker. This is also reflected in many dialogues in *Home with Kids*.

(1) Xia Xue: My name is Xia Xue.

Xia Yu: My name is Xia Yu.

Liu Xing: My name is “hail”.

This conversation took place when Xia Xue, Xia Yu and Liu Xing introduce themselves to their mother’s old friend. In this dialogue, the three children’s locutionary act is to say their own names. After Xia Xue and Xia Yu introduced themselves, Liu Xing unconsciously said his own name wrong, misinterpreting the *summer* as its homophone *Xia* in Chinese, so names of them two were weather phenomena *snow* and *rain* respectively, and he was *hail* for another weather phenomenon. Obviously, this is also a situation in which humor is caused by the literal meaning, that is, the locutionary act.

(2) Lin Fan (excited): Are you the lovely Xia Xue’s brother?

Liu Xing (giggling): I am the lovely brother of Xia Xue.

This is a conversation between Liu Xing and Lin Fan, Xia Xue’s classmate. He could have answered Lin Fan’s question with yes or no. But he repeated Lin Fan’s words and deliberately reversed the order of the two adjectives, putting the word “lovely” at the end to describe himself, so as to emphasize his cuteness. In this conversation, the use of the literal meaning of language itself makes humorous effects, neither far-fetched nor artificial, surprisingly make people laugh heartily.

(3) Liu Mei: Who was Confucius’ teacher?

Liu Xing: A drill. Without a drill, where would hole come from?

In this dialogue, Liu Xing did not know who Confucius’ teacher was, but he did not want to admit the fact. In order to save face in front of his mother, Liu Xing deliberately said that Confucius’ teacher was the drill. The literal meaning of locutionary act is even absurd, which has an unexpected humorous effect instead.

(4) Liu Xing (to an aunt wearing glasses): Open your big, dewy-looking glasses and have a good look!

In this sentence, Liu Xing used adjective *dewy-looking* to describe *big glasses*, which involves both personification and irony. Because *dewy-looking* is usually used to describe the eyes, indicating that the eyes are big and beautiful. But for an aunt wearing glasses, her glasses are not dewy actually. This situation shows that Liu Xing deliberately misused it, using the contradiction between literal meaning expressed by the words themselves and the common cognition of the real

world to produce humorous effects.

3.3.2. Humor Produced by Illocutionary Force of Speech

To understand the humor of conversations, it is not adequate for us to know the literal meaning of sentence, what more important is to understand the speaker's actual intention, that is, illocutionary force of his words. In life, listeners may sometimes misunderstand what the speaker is saying, or take a dismissive reaction for various reasons, and it is this incorrect understanding and neglected reaction that can sometimes create humor.

(1) Grandma: Only by experiencing the hardest hardships can one rise above the ordinary.

Xia Yu: Can suffering ride on someone else's head?

In this dialogue, the illocutionary force of grandma's words is to teach Xia Yu the truth of life. She hopes he understands that life is not smooth. There will always be setbacks, and only after combating setbacks can he become a better person. It is necessary to temper one's will from an early age and improve one's ability in all aspects. However, because of his young age, Xia Yu did not understand the illocutionary force of his grandma's words, and misunderstood *being more excellent than others as riding on the head of others*. The reason why laughing explanation occurred is that Xia Yu's misunderstanding to his grandma's true meaning.

(2) Liu Mei: Our company is looking for a cleaner. You said Gong Hai's mother doesn't have a regular job. She can go to work tomorrow if she wants to.

Xiao Xue: That's great, Mom. This is a fishing rod for Gong Hai's mother.

Liu Mei: I didn't give his mother a fishing pole.

This conversation is about Liu Mei introducing a job to mother of Xia Xue's classmate Gong Hai, because the Gong hai's family situation is poor. In this dialogue, it is obvious that Xia Xue's illocutionary force is to appreciate Liu Mei's action for helping the Gonghai family a lot, and they can get rid of the difficulties in their current life. So Xia Xue used *fishing rods* as a metaphor for tools or ways to maintain their lives. However, Liu Mei did not understand Xia Xue's meaning, and directly understood *fishing rod* as *fishing tool*. Therefore, what makes audience laugh is an asymmetry of messages in this dialogue.

(3) (Liu Mei's cousin's house decoration, not completed in a month, the foreman deliberately delayed)

Foreman (on the other end of the phone): Who are you?

Liu Mei: I'm the only one my mother has, you say who I am.

In this conversation, the illocutionary force of foreman's words is that delaying the construction was none of Liu Mei's business, so she was not qualified to urge him to work. Liu Mei didn't want to talk nonsense to the foreman of the contract. And in order to gain control of the conversation, she deliberately misunderstood the illocutionary force of foreman, and understood *lao ji* as the order in which she was born. This unexpected answer directly makes people laugh.

(4) Liu Xing: Do you know, today the teacher found a genius, and this genius is me.

Mom: Oh, this peach is so sweet. (Laughter)

Dad: That's right!

Liu Xing: There are many kinds of genius, not only those who gain high scores, right, dad?

Dad: This peach is reminiscent of the ginseng fruit in Journey to the West.

Mom: There is ginseng fruit sold in the supermarket in front of our house.

Liu Xing: Oh, you guys listen to me. Today the teacher's car keys were lost, and I found them.

Dad: It seems that sand monks also love to eat. (Laughter)

Liu Xing: Guess where I found it. I found it on the lock. I forgot to pull it off.

Dad: Actually, Tang Seng also loves to eat. He is too clever to speak out.

Liu Xing: But no one else thought of it. Only I think of it, it means that I am a genius in this field.

Really, with a little training, I am a detective scientist, just like Sherlock Holmes...

During this conversation, Liu Xing has been talking about what happened at school to prove that he is a genius, while his parents have been talking about peaches. The illocutionary force of Liu Xing's words is to attract the attention of his family and make everyone praise him. But the perlocutionary effect of this force is that his parents deliberately ignored him. Despite communicating in the same conversation, the speakers each talk about their own topic and what they say has nothing to do with the other party, so it is the irrelevance of their words and the family's neglect of Liu Xing's boast that makes the humorous effect occur.

4. Conclusions

In everyday interactions, it is not enough for us to understand the literal meaning of the speaker, that is, the meaning of locutionary act. We must be able to combine the speaker's words with specific context to understand the true intention of him, that is, illocutionary force of his words. Otherwise it will be difficult to carry out communication. Humor is often caused by the meaning expressed by the words themselves, or by causing the react of listener to the speaker for some reason.

Through the analysis, the internal relationship between speech acts and humor can be known. That is, the humor in *Home with Kids* is created by using techniques, such as expression of the literal meaning by locutionary act itself, and the distortion or ignorance of illocutionary force in a specific context. Understanding these techniques can help us better understand and appreciate the humor of *Home with Kids* and it will also help us make use of these techniques to produce humor.

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