"Package," Rhetorical Techniques, and Translation:
Exploring the Booming of Chinese Sketches in Language Aspects

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Comedies, especially sketches and cross talks, have gained popularity among Chinese people in the past twenty years for diverse reasons. One reason that cannot be ignored is the effective employment of language, i.e., the boom of comedies in China cannot be interpreted without referring to the proper utilization of rhetorical techniques. Comedy writers cleverly exploit rhetorical techniques, such as malapropism, parody, syllepsis, hyperbole, and hypallage, etc. Although the complexity of rhetorical techniques in Chinese language leads to difficulties in Chinese-English translation, it can be argued that Chinese rhetorical techniques in comedy are translatable. This paper first of all attempts to explore packages in cross talks and sketches. An effort is then made to analyze the rhetorical techniques used in comedy. Lastly, the translation methodology used in comedy is specified.

The last 20 years have seen the booming of comedies, especially the comic sketches in China, which can be verified by the fact that people do not feel that they have enjoyed themselves at celebrations and parties if the comic sketches are absent. Without a comic sketch, a celebration or party is incomplete. That the comic sketches are indispensable can be demonstrated by "Chunwan" (an evening party held by CCTV for celebrating the coming of the Chinese Lunar New Year), and the impact of the comic sketches is so great that some lines involved in the comic sketches even enter the daily life of Chinese people. Varied reasons exist for the popularity of the sketches, among which the effective employment of language cannot be ignored. In other words, people enjoy sketches because they, in most cases, appreciate the resourceful usage of language. A good cross talk or a sketch makes good use of "packages" (comedic jokes) which in turn make the cross talk or the sketch popular. It is acknowledged that an effective package cannot result without a proper employment of rhetorical devices, which are indispensable in the production of good packages and good cross talks or sketches.

Sketches, Cross Talks, and Packages: An Interpretation

Sketches, which evolve from short plays performed by student actors for practice on stage, can be classified into different categories from different aspects or points of view. Based on the art effects, sketches can be classified as tragic, comic, and tragicomic. In terms of performance style, sketches can be categorized into opera sketches, modern drama sketches, or the traditional Chinese opera sketches. The sketches now most welcome by Chinese in their evening parties are the combinations of comedies and modern drama sketches, which are referred to by some scholars as "entertainment sketches" or simply "sketches," for short, because they are often performed at evening parties. Such sketches are characterized by their wit of language usage in the aim of entertaining an audience. In this

sense, it is worth noting that they are described as a manifestation of the language art. A variety of means are employed to demonstrate the charm of language, and diverse forms are applied to the traditional Chinese performance art in their development. Among them, the technique of "undoing a package," which evolved out of the cross talk, a traditional Chinese talk show well known for "undoing the package" in its performances, is frequently used in sketches.

"Package," a specific term in cross talks, denotes the humorous part of the plot; the way it is presented is termed "undoing the package," which is highly valued in cross talks. It is commonly accepted that a successful play results from undoing the package effectively. A well-done "undoing" usually triggers great laughter and amusement, symbolizing a successful performance. The idea behind "undoing the package," just like uncovering a box or parcel to reveal the treasure inside, is to reveal the entertaining or humorous aspects of the plot.

To undo the package well, several indispensable factors require consideration. First, the package, or the treasure in the box, must be rational and unexpected, with the result that the audience recognizes that they have not wasted time to see or listen to the performance. Second, the package must stay hidden before the proper time arrives for its presentation. A well-hidden package can keep the audience's interests and make the audience laugh heartily when the package is finally undone. The package must be undone wittily and in a timely fashion. A good *pant*, which is the climax of any episode in a cross talk or sketch, must be revealed naturally and unexpectedly. A cross talk may contain one package, but it usually contains more than one.

Undoing the package plays such an important role in the cross talk that both the writers and the actors spare no effort in developing a good package.

Rhetorical Use in Undoing the Package

To undo a package well involves many aspects, such as intonation, proper pause, or the right non-verbal behaviors. However, special attention is paid in this paper to the effective use of language, among which rhetorical employment is the concentration of the paper.

As mentioned above, a good cross talk or sketch usually contains more than one package; in order to make them lively, one cross talk or sketch may commonly employ many rhetorical techniques since clever rhetoric makes good packages; in turn, good packages make up an entertaining show. The rhetorical techniques listed in this paper are on the top of the list employed by a sketch or a cross talk; they are: malapropism, parody, syllepsis, hyperbole, and hypallage.

Firstly, malapropism is a frequently employed rhetorical device in sketches or cross talks. Here, malapropism is conceptualized as the misuse of a word that results in humor. The ludicrous misuse of a word may exist in pronunciation, spelling, meaning, grammar, or even in logic. This can be demonstrated in the following example.

> Example 1. 乙：你儿子的历史考得怎么样?
>
> (B: How was your son's history exam?)
>
> 甲：不及格,*他们尽问一些孩子还没出世之前的问题。*
>
> (A: He Failed. *Because the questions were all about things*

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that happened before my son was born.)

In this dialogue, A misuses logic. In his opinion, it is not the child but the teacher who should be blamed for the child's failure of the history exam since the questions were about events that occurred before the child was born. He believes that a child evidently could not know what had happened before he was born. The humor lies in his explanation of the reason behind his son's failure.

Secondly, parody is frequently used in the sketches or cross talks. Parody simply refers to imitation, which is another rhetorical device commonly used in these comedies. Parody can be an imitation of a word, a sentence, or the tune of a *ci* (a kind of Chinese traditional poem with a set tune to be sung). This can be verified by the following example.

Example 2. 父亲：孩子，你要是考不上大学，我就不认你这个 儿子。

(Father: My son, if you do not go to college, I'll not keep you as my son.)

儿子：我要是考上了大学，我就不认你这个爸爸。

(Son: If I could go to college, I wouldn't keep you as my father.)

The humor in this example lies in the fact that the son cleverly imitates his father's sentence pattern to fight his father back.

Thirdly, syllepsis is one of most commonly employed rhetorical techniques used to create humor both in cross talks and sketches. It makes use of homophony or polysemy in Chinese to create misunderstanding or misinterpretation. This can be demonstrated in the example as follows:

Example 3. 崔: 今天的话题是昨天、今天、明天。

(Cui: Today we are going to talk about yesterday (past), today (present), and tomorrow (future)).

男:昨天在家准备了一宿，今天上这里来了，明天回去。

(Man: Yesterday we were preparing for this program; today we are here; tomorrow we are going back home.)

崔: 不是。我不是让你说昨天、今天、明天, 是往前说。

(Cui: Oh no. I don't mean yesterday, today, and tomorrow, but something before that.)

女: 前天, 我们俩接到的乡里通知。

(Woman: The day before yesterday we received the notice from the Township Government.)

崔: 大叔大妈, 我说的昨天、今天、明天呀,

不是昨天、今天、明天。

(Cui: Grandpa and Grandma, the yesterday (past), today (present) and tomorrow (future) I mentioned are not yesterday, today and tomorrow.)

男: 那是后天。

    (Man: It must be the day after tomorrow.)

崔: 不是后天。

    (Cui: No, it is not the day after tomorrow.)

女: 那是哪天呀!

    (Woman: Then which day?)

崔: 不是哪一天。我说的这个昨天、今天、明天呀,

    就是咱们回忆一下过去, 再评说一下现在,

    再展望一下未来。你听明白了吗?

    (Cui: It is not a specific day. By yesterday, today, and tomorrow, I mean that we look back on the past, comment on the present, and look forward to the future. Do you understand?)

男: 那是过去、现在和将来。

    (Man: That is past, present, and future.)

女: 也不是昨天、今天和明天。

    (Woman: That is not yesterday, today, and tomorrow.)

The conversation in this example makes use of the polysemy of "yesterday," "today," and "tomorrow" in Chinese to create misinterpretation between Cui and the old couple when developing the pant: these three words also mean past, present, and future in Chinese.

Next, hyperbole is frequently utilized in the sketches or cross talks. According to Holman (1980), hyperbole refers to an exaggerated figure of speech used to heighten effect, to produce comic effect. Hyperbole is frequently employed in both cross talks and sketches, just as in comedy, to heighten the effect.

> Example 4. (In the sketch of *Date with Youth*, when the brother accidentally finds out the age of the Male Number 2, who his sister falls in love with at first sight at a match-making party, he cries out,)
>
> "小妹啊，难道你缺少父爱吗？"
>
> (Oh, Sister, do you lack Father's love?)

The words in this example demonstrate his surprise and dissatisfaction with Male Number 2 because he looks much older than the younger sister. The word "父爱" (Father's love) is an exaggeration as Male Number 2 is not as old as her father.

Finally, hypallage is frequently employed in the sketches and cross talks. According to Cuddon (1992), hypallage can be understood as a transferred epithet and occurs when a modifier is intentionally applied to the wrong word in a sentence. When one word in a specific field is used to describe a situation in another context, of course, the ill match will lead to laughter.

> Example 5. (In the sketch of *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, when the old lady
> is praised for her beauty by the host, she sighs,)
>
> "现在不行了，头发也白了，皱纹也增长了，两颗洁白的门牙也
>
> 于去年光荣'*下岗*'了。"
>
> (I am not young any more, the hair graying, the lines increasing, even
> the two bright front teeth *having gone off their sentry duty* last year.)

The word "下岗" in this example originally refers to the soldiers or the guards going off their sentry duty, but it is used by the old lady to describe the loss of her teeth, which causes people to laugh.

Translating Rhetoric

It is generally acknowledged that translating cross talks and sketches is not an easy task. Sometimes the translation will cause the comedy lose its color, or even totally lose the amusement originally present in the source language. The reasons for this lie in the translation and cultural differences. First, translation is difficult. A good translation of any kind should keep the style of the source and be as readable and effective in the target language as it is in the source language. Second, the translation of comedies of any kind is difficult, so it is the same with cross talks and sketches. The difficulty lies more in the cultures behind the languages than in languages. Moreover, the rhetoric, which is culturally related in most cases, always makes the translation more difficult. Rhetoric exists in any language, but it presents itself differently because it embodies the various beauties, the uniqueness, and the structures of different languages. Some languages do not even share the features of others.

However, translation of any kind is needed at any time because it might be an effective way to promote intercultural communication. Despite the difficulty of translating, many techniques have been explored for effective translation. Here, culture is introduced as a criterion for translating cross talks and sketches. Comedies, like many other kinds of literature, are untranslatable because people have diverse cultural backgrounds that affect how they understand humor. In this sense, culture plays an important role in comedy translation. An understanding of humor requires a similar understanding of culture.

As we know, translating something culture-specific is of great difficulty. Therefore, we can employ culture as a guide to tell us how to translate. If it is culture-related, add some notes to help understand; otherwise, translate it directly.

Take the above examples:

Example 1 is translatable as A misuses the logic which exists in every culture. However, if a speaker misuses the word in other aspects, such as pronunciation, spelling, meaning or grammar, which are culture-related, special notes are needed.

Translating a parody is contextually dependent. If it imitates the grammar form, as example 2 shows, it is easy to translate; otherwise, special notes may be needed if necessary.

Examples 3 and 5 need special notes too, since the words "昨天" (yesterday), "今天" (today), "明天" (tomorrow) and "下岗" (go off one's sentry duty) either have more than one meaning or are used in the "wrong" situation.

As for example 4, "父爱" (father's love) is situation-related, so it is not necessary to add

notes.

Conclusion

As we have shown, packages, cross talks and sketches, and rhetorical techniques are interrelated. A good cross talk or sketch makes good use of packages, which, in turn, make the cross talk or the sketch popular. In fact, a good package cannot exist without the proper use of rhetoric. Clever use of rhetoric makes good packages, and good packages make good cross talks and sketches. As for the translation of the cross talks and sketches, culture can be introduced as a criterion. If the lines are culturally related, add some notes to help foster understanding; otherwise, translate them directly.

References

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