



# A Study on the Humorous Effect in German from the Relevance Theory Perspective

Fuqiang Ran

Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, China

1533365127@qq.com

**Abstract.** Humorous effect is an old topic and there are many theories trying to give an explanation on it. Relevance theory is one of them. There already have been some relevance theory studies on the humorous effect but the corpus is mainly Chinese or English and there are no enough studies on German. Therefore, this study aims to take a famous German comedy series as the case to find the humorous effect in German from the relevance theory perspective

**Keywords:** Relevance Theory, Humorous Effect, German, Ladykracher

## 1 Introduction

Humor is an old topic through centuries. Humor can make people laugh and overjoyed, therefore it is reasonable that many scholars are interested in its study. There already have been many theories explaining how the humorous effect is caused but there are few studies on the humor of German. Therefore, this study will choose the famous comedy series of Ladykracher to give an analysis on the humorous effect from the relevance theory perspective.

There are many domestic and foreign studies on the humorous effect. Most of the studies adopt the linguistic methods. The major linguistic perspectives are cognitive linguistics and pragmatics.

The cognitive linguistics puts emphasis on the essence of humor and its effect. [8]Some cognitive linguistic studies adopt the figure/ground segregation to analysis the humor background from social background, event background and presupposition background, trying to find the construction of the humorous effect. (Bai and Zhang, 2013) [11,13]Beside figure/ ground segregation, the frame theory and the metaphor theories are both widely used in the study of humor. (Zou, 2010)(Zhao, 2009)

The pragmatic studies are mainly from four perspectives. [7]The first is the perspective of conversational implicature, including the cooperation principle and the politeness principle. (Song, 2016) [5]The second is the perspective of implicature. (Bao, 2021) [6,12]The third is the memetic perspective. (Liao, 2009) (Wang, 2018) [4]The fourth perspective is a combination of pragmatic and cognition linguistics, the relevance theory perspective. (Zhan, 2023)

Besides the perspectives mentioned above, there are also several other perspectives. <sup>[3,9]</sup>The first is the phonetic perspective, which gives an analysis on the phonological deviation and prosodic means in the comedy shows. (Tan and Xiao, 2011) (Taratenko, 2022) What's more. <sup>[10]</sup>There is also the teleology perspective (Xu and Zhang, 2011), <sup>[1,2]</sup>the second language acquisition perspective (Shively, 2022) and the translation perspective. (Fernández, 2021)

The second language acquisition perspective is a meaningful perspective and it can help the foreign language teachers better teach the students how to use the humorous in the second language but it is not effective in analyzing the humorous effect of comedy shows, which has nothing to do with teaching. The teleology perspective and the translation perspective both have the same problem. The phonetic perspective puts more emphasis on the sound message and provides many detailed information about the humorous effect but its study is so specific that it considers the context less, which makes the study not very effective and convincing because the context is very important in the humorous effect. The pragmatic study takes the context into consideration but most of the pragmatic studies are on the text and they seldom give analysis on the cognitive mechanism. The cognition linguistics do give analysis on the humorous effect from the role of cognition but both the figure/ ground segregation and the frame theory put too much attention on the image, the visual resource and the attention on the verbal language is not enough. Therefore, studies combining the cognition and the pragmatics are preferred and the best perspective should be the relevance theory, which will be used to give an analysis on the humorous effect of Ladykracher's comedy shows.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

Relevance Theory is a famous pragmatic theory put forward by Sperber and Wilson in their work *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. It developed from the conversational implicature theory and combines the cognition science into the linguistic studies. The relevance theory thinks that the communication is based on relevance. In a pragmatic circumstance, people tend to choose the maximum correlation to achieve their communication purpose. <sup>[4]</sup>The relevance theory is widely used in the study of humorous effect and it was put forward that the humorous effect is caused by three methods based on the relevance theory, the maximum correlation and the optical relation, the cognition disparity and the disparity between the informative intention and the communicative. (Zhan, 2023)

Firstly, the difference between the maximum correlation and optical relation is the major causer of the humorous effect. The maximum correlation happens when one does not have to pay much cognition effort to understand. The optical correlation happens when one needs to pay some effective effort to understand. In most cases, the humorous effect is caused by the difference between the maximum correlation and the optical relation. Normally, the comedy show will provide enough messages for the audience to achieve the maximum correlation then it shows the optical relation and the huge difference between the new optical relation and the former maximum correlation will naturally make the audience laugh. Then, the humorous effect is achieved.

Secondly, the cognition disparity is another causer of humorous effect. The relevance theory thinks that the contextual cognition of the basement of communication, which means that if the conversation can smoothly move on, there must be some common definition upon some key concepts. If there is a disparity in the contextual cognition, it will sometime bring humorous effect.

Thirdly, the disparity between the informative intention and the communicative intention is also a causer of humorous effect. The informative intention means that the natural and original meaning of the message and it is the basement for the deduction. The communicative intention refers to the deeper meaning and it can be comprehended by the deduction. From the relevance theory perspective, humor is a result of the difference between the natural meaning and the pragmatic meaning in a particular context. The bigger the difference is, the stronger the humorous effect will be.

### 3 Discussion

#### 3.1 The Maximum Correlation and Optical Relation

Example1: A: Robber B: Female official C: Hostage

A: And what do you want to sprinkle us? Poison? Or Acid?

B: Yes, it is acid. I want to sprinkle you all with my full acid. Take out the money quickly.

A: And, which acid is it?

C: Carbonic Acid.

German Version

A: Und womit genau wollen Sie da spritzen? Gift? Oder Säure?

B: Ja, genau mit Säure. Ich spritz euch alle voll Säure. Also rückt die Kohle raus.

A: Und, äh, was ist das für eine Säure?

C: Kohlensäure.

This conversation takes place in a bank robbery. The hostage is controlled by the robber just by a bottle of soda water but no one notices this in the first place. It is the hostage who firstly find that the robber has no deadly weapon and he only has a bottle of soda then she shouts that the robber has only a bottle of soda water. Hearing this, the female official want to make sure what the robber truly holds. Therefore, she asks the question. In a robbery circumstance, the Maximum correlation is built that the answer should be something deadly or at least it should be something will hurt the hostage severely. Then the optimal relevance answer, carbonic acid, comes. The difference between the maximum correlation and the optimal relevance is so big that the humorous effect is achieved. One is the something like sulfuric acid, which can burn one's skin and even kill someone. One is carbonic acid, which can be found everywhere in our daily life. This contrast reasonably makes people out of laugh.

Example2: Dear Lady and Gentleman. We have already landed in Köln Bonn. I want to represent the whole flight service team to thank you for choosing us. If you don't feel satisfied with our flight service, I suggest you having a dinner at Nobel restaurant and make a comparison and you will find our service is good.

German Version

Meine Damen und Herren. Wir sind söben in Köln Bonn gelandet. Und ich möchte mich im Namen der gesamten Besatzung bei Ihnen bedanken dass Sie mit uns geflogen sind. Sollte Ihnen das Service on Board nicht gefallen haben. So empfehle ich Ihnen heute abend einfach mal im Restaurant zum Nobel essen zu gehen. Im Vergleich zu denen ist unser Service nämlich richtig gut.

The is a broadcast of a stewardess after landing on the destination airport. First several sentences are very standard sentences and they are just used to tell the customers that they have already reached their destination. Things become odd when the stewardess mentions customers' dissatisfaction on their service. In the common sense, the maximum correlation should be how to make a complaint or at least how they can make themselves satisfied. However, the next sentence of the stewardess says that she advises the customs to go to a restaurant which provides unwell service and makes the optical relevance. The optical relevance is a surprise. As a stewardess, she was supposed to be considerate but her words like this did not show consideration then the humorous effect is caused.

Example3: A: Kidnapper 1 B: Kidnapper 2 C: Hostage

A: And it should be a "million" but not a "millions". You are so stupid. I know that you do not prepare for this dictation. Your writing is so bad and you must try hard to practice so that you can earn more money in the future.

B: I have already prepared the camera

A: Yes. Then stand up. Now you pay attention to the reading work.

C: Dear mama. Dear papa. I have been kidnapped by two people. You should give them one million euro cash then I can be free.

German Version

A: Und heißt eine Milion, und nicht eine Millionen. Lauter solcher Klaps. Ich weiß, dass das ein ungeübtes Diktat ist. Aber wer so schlecht schreibt, der muss sich später echt anstrengen, wenn er geld veridienen will.

B: Du, ich mach da jetzt mal die Kamera ne.

A: Ja. So steh auf. Jetzt gibt dir wenigsten beim Vorlesen Mühe.

C: Liebe Mama, liebe papa, heute haben mich zwei Menschen entführt. Gegen eine Million Euro Lösegeld lassen die mich wieder frei.

This takes place in a kidnap case. The movie begins with the female kidnapper who helps the hostage with his homework. She is just like a real mother who help her kid with his homework. She says a lot of things about the errors in the dictation. This makes the audience think that they are just an ordinary couple of son and mother. When the male kidnapper says the camera is ready, the female kidnapper takes the boy away and asks him to take a seat. Based on the former settings, the audience may think that the maximum correlation here is that the boy is videoing a homework and two kidnappers are really his parents who works hard to help him improve his study skills. But when the boy begins to read, things are different. Here, the optical relation comes and it points out that the two people are kidnapper not his parents. Actually, the optical relation is reasonable because the female kidnapper complains the spelling of "million" before and this word "million" is used to ask for a ransom. The humorous effect is caused by a misleading to a maximum correlation that two kidnappers are his parents and a sudden explosion of the optical relation in this case.

### 3.2 The Cognition Disparity

Example4: A: Mother B: Daughter

A: We are the two who love you the most and we give you a rabbit.

B: It has no furs.

A: Furs will get stuck between the teeth.

German Version

A: Du, da müssen dich aber 2 Menschen im Raum richtig haben, dass sie dir eine Kaninchen schenken, was?

B: Das hat ja über hat kein Fell.

A: Du, das Fell das stört nur zwischen den Zähnen.

This happens in a birthday party. A couple prepare a roasted rabbit for their daughter as the birthday gift but what their daughter wants is a pet rabbit with which she can play. The couple and the girl do not have a same contextual cognition on the rabbit. When the gift is shown to the girl, the couple is satisfied and they think they love their daughter the most but their daughter feels very disappointed at that moment. The girl dose not dare to complain directly that it is not what she wants. She just says this rabbit has no furs to imply that in her contextual cognition, the rabbit should be a pet rabbit but not a roasted rabbit. But for the couple, rabbit refers to a roasted rabbit in their contextual cognition so they cannot understand what their daughter is talking about and reply that furs make it hard to eat. This difference in their contextual cognition makes this humorous effect.

Example 5:

A: Aren't you vegetarians? You have said that before, Do you have something like salad?

B: We love plants. This was what we said.

A: Yes, just like us.

B: Nope. You obviously doesn't. You want to eat the plants.

German Version

A: Aber ihr seid doch Vegatarier? Das habt ihr doch erzählt. Habt ihr keinen Salat oder so?

B: Wir lieben Pflanzen, das haben wir erzählt.

A: Ja genau wie wir.

B: Naja offensichtlich doch nicht. Ihr scheint ja jede Pflanze auffressen zu wollen, die sich nicht wert.

This takes places in a dinner. There are two couples and the guest couple is vegetarian. The host couple prepare a meat dish and they make the guest couple annoyed. They think they are fooled by the host couple and they complain that they said they were vegetarian before but now they cook a meat dish, which shows no respect. Actually, here is a misunderstanding. What the host couple said before is that they love plants and it can be interpreted in two ways. In the first way, it can be interpreted that they are vegetarians and they love eat vegetables. This is what the guest think based on their contextual cognition. The second way thinks that they love plants so they want to protect plants so that they will eat no plants. This is what the host couple think based on

their contextual cognition. The difference in their contextual cognition makes them have different understanding on “love plants” and this makes the humorous effect here.

Example 6:

A: Who are you?

B: I am Miriam. Where is my mother?

A: You dress like Marcel.

B: I want my mother.

A: Oh, god. I am also a mother.

German Version

A: Wo bist du?

B: Ich bin die Miriam. Wo ist meine Mama?

A: Aber du trägst die gleiche Jacke wie der Marcel, oder?

B: Ich will zu meiner Mama

A: Himmelherrgott. Ich bin auch Mama.

This takes place in a car. A lady gets in the car. She thinks that the girl seat behind her is her daughter but actually the girl isn't. The Lady become aware of this when she sees her real daughter behind the glass. Then she asks the girl in the girl who she is. The girl in the car answers the lady's question. Then the girl begins to shout that she wants her mother. In the girl's contextual cognition, the mother refers to the mother that born her. In the lady's contextual cognition, she wants someone who is a mother so she tries to calm down the girl by telling her that she is also a mother. Therefore, the humorous effect was achieved by the difference interpretation of mother.

### 3.3 The Informative Intention and the Communicative Intention

Example 7:

A: Mr. Rolf. Your resume is so great. You have a degree in a housework economy school in Hamburg. Then you have worked for Jamie Oliver for four years. How is he in private?

B: Do you want to know the truth?

A: I see. (Laugh)

German Version

A: So, Herr Rolf. Ja, das ist sicher alles ganz imponant hier. Hauswirtschaftsschule in Hamburg. Dann 4 Jahren in London unter Jamie Oliver gearbeitet. Wie isst er so in privat?

B: Wollen Sie eine ehrliche Antwort?

A: Verstehe

This happens in the first day of A's new work. The employer is very satisfied with this new employee because he not only has a degree in a special school but has some work experience before. This makes A to be a great employee for her so she praises him in the first place then she becomes interested in the former employer of this man then she asks about how his former employer is. The answer of A is “Do you want to know the truth?”. The informative intention of A is to ask whether the employer wants to know the truth and it can be regarded as an ostensive one. The audience can deduct on his words. If he is satisfied with his former employer, he will hardly leave from his

old boss and even he has to leave him for some special reasons, he will directly answer the new employer's question because good words will not cost too much and it will not threaten other's face. Therefore, A most likely does not think Oliver is a good employer and conveying this information is the communicative intention. The difference between the informative intention and the communicative intention makes the humorous effect.

Example 8: A: Doctor B: Patient C: Nurse

A: OK. Now, relax. Can I begin the rectal examination?

B: OK

C: Sorry, Doctor Rela. I have bought a superglue. Do you know where is it? I have searched for it everywhere but I only find the lubricant.

German Version

A: So, und jetzt, soweit es geht entspannen, damit ich den Enddarm abtasten kann ja?

B: Alles Klar.

C: Doktor Rela, Entschuldigung, aber ich hatte für den abgebrochenen Garder-obenhaken Sekundenkleber gekauft. Wissen Sie, wo der ist? Ich hab es hiermit versucht, aber das is nur Gleitgel.

This example takes place in a hospital. A male patient is going to have his rectal examination, which uses the lubricant. When the doctor begins to do the rectal examination and put her finger in, the nurse comes in. The nurse says that she can't find her new superglue and asks the doctor whether she knows where it is then she states that after searching she only finds the lubricant. The informative intention of "I only find the lubricant" is that she can only find the lubricant but she cannot find her superglue but the communicative intention, the pragmatic meaning worth more attention. The nurse mentions the lubricant when searching for the superglue, which means that the superglue and the lubricant look similarly. The nurse holds the lubricant used for rectal examination then it is very possible that what the doctor used before is superglue and the next scene proves this. Therefore, the difference between the informative intention and the communicative intention of "I only find the lubricant" makes the humorous effect.

## 4 Conclusion

This essay gives an analysis on the humorous effect of German based on the corpus of Ladykracher series and finds three kinds of humor causer method, the maximum correlation and the optical relation, the cognition disparity and the disparity between the informative intention and the communicative intention, also widely exists in the German language. This study just selects some examples to analysis but do not take an quantitative analysis and this kind of study is hoped to be done in the future.

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