

Is Humor Embodied? - An empirical study of humor perception in Chinese

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The study investigates how humor is understood and conceptualized by Chinese speakers with an empirical approach. It has been proposed that human perception of the world is grounded in salient bodily experiences such as sensory simulations, situated actions and bodily postures (see Barsalou 1999, 2008). Over the last few decades, efforts have been made by cognitive linguists to prove this experiential view of language understanding (e.g., Glenberg & Kaschak 2002, Zwaan & Pecher 2012). However, it is still controversial whether the understanding of abstract concepts can be fully explained under this view. The current study aims to address the important issue of humor understanding and perception by looking into the language-specific association of humor and conventional metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson 1999, Gibbs 1994). Based on findings of two empirical studies, we propose that humor, as an abstract concept, is understood through embodied conceptual metaphors.

The two studies, which are mutually complementary, include a corpus-based textual analysis and a behavioral experiment. First, we examined humor-related texts extracted from a large Chinese corpus (the CCL corpus by Peking University). By searching for passages related to the lemma xiào 笑 'laughter/to laugh', a large number of embodied conceptual metaphors are found, such as HUMOR IS FORCE (e.g., bèi hōng-xiào jī-dǎo 被哄笑击倒 'knocked down by laughing'), HUMOR IS BODY POSTURE (e.g., xié-jiān chǎn-xiào 胁肩谄笑 'a fake smile with hunched shoulders'), and HUMOR IS SENSORY PERCEPTION (e.g., kǔ-xiào 苦笑 'bitter smile'). These metaphors are in line with previous findings on metaphorical expressions in English and German (Samermitt & Gibbs 2016). Second, we conducted a behavioral experiment to further testify if humor is embodied through metaphors. Based on the conceptual metaphors identified in the text analysis, two frequently used expressions with bodily movement yǎng tiān dà xiào 仰天大笑 'laughing with upper body up to the sky' and pěng fù dà xiào 捧腹大笑 'laughing by holding one's belly', are chosen as the stimuli for metaphor-based bodily cues, to be compared with non-metaphor-based cues (such as moving horizontally). Forty-two participants in two experimental groups (twenty and twenty two in each group) were first familiarized with and instructed to repeat the different sets of bodily cues demonstrated in a video clip respectively. Another control group of twenty three participants was not required to view video clips or do bodily motion. All three groups were then asked to rate the same set of twenty written jokes. Results show that the group of participants who are cued with and mimicked the metaphor-based movement rated the jokes significantly higher than the other two groups. And there is no significant difference between those who mimicked the non-metaphor-based movement and those in the control group. In other words, the metaphorically-triggered bodily experience can prime participants with higher perceptual tuning to humor, which results in higher ratings of the jokes.

Therefore, it is concluded that humor is embodied through metaphorical associations in a language-specific manner. The findings support the embodied view of humor understanding and sheds new light on the theoretical development of the embodiment of abstract concepts.

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