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# Advances in Higher Education

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# A Multimodal Study on Humor Factors --- a Case Study of The Big Bang Theory

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**Abstract:** With a number of American sit-coms are enjoying an increasing popularity around the world, lots of studies have been done on how the language is used in American sit-coms to realize the humor from linguistic or literature perspective, which is limited to humors involving only language. But people are becoming more and more aware that it is far from enough to only take words in sit-coms into consideration when talking about humor factors in sit-coms. With the remarkable development of the multi-media and computer technology, the thriving multimodal discourse analysis since 1990s has become a hot issue in the linguistic study.

Taking the second episode from The Big Bang Theory's Season One as an example, the multimodal discourse analysis on the sit-com will be done in such two respects "words and bodily expressions" and "pictures and background sound".

This study reaches the expectation. Through the case study of the filmic discourse The Big Bang Theory, it is found that the theory of multimodal discourse analysis provides the audiences with a new perspective of appreciating the American sit-coms by reflecting the role of modalities other than language in disclosing the humors of the sit-com and ultimately elevates their appreciation level on humor factors in American sit-coms.

**Keywords:** Multimodal discourse analysis; American sit-coms; Humor factors; The Big Bang Theory

## 1. Introduction

Humor refers to a quality in something that makes you laugh, for example in a situation, in someone's words or action, or in a book or film. (Longman Advanced American Dictionary: 709) Generally, humor is conveyed in term of language, either written or spoken. Scholars have done a lot of studies on humor in literature works from the verbal perspective. Besides, in our daily life, humor always comes along with form of language. But different people have different comprehension towards the language due to different cultural backgrounds. Sometimes we find it hard to understand a verbal humor in daily life if we haven't acquired relevant background information. When we talk to other people in daily life, all the carried information in the language is deeply influenced by culture. When we talk, we are actually delivering the culture rooted in our mind. So the author supposes that humor in daily life language is merely suitable for a certain group of people who has had associated cultural knowledge.

Nowadays, with a number of American sit-coms are enjoying an increasing popularity around the world, lots of studies have been done on the humors in these sit-coms. But most of the current studies are on how the language in American sit-coms realizes the humor in them, which are also from a verbal perspective, only suitable for certain group of people with certain cultural background. But people are becoming more and more aware that it is far from enough to take only words in sit-coms into consideration when talking about humor factors in sit-coms.

Thriving in the 1990s, multimodal discourse refers to those discourses that generate the integrative meaning through the interaction of two or more semiotic modes of communication, for example, language, dynamic and static visual images, architecture and three-dimensional objects in the realm of material lived-in space, electronic media, film and print.

So this thesis attempts to utilize the multimodal discourse analysis to study the humor factors in the popular American sit-com The Big Bang Theory so that more people can obtain humor factors in it more directly.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter intends to present the theoretical framework since this filmic discourse is a combination of different modalities and different meanings.

### 2.1 Classification of Different Modalities in Sit-Coms

#### 2.1.1 Modality Forms in Sit-Coms

As is known, the filmic discourse is a combination of different modalities which encompasses not only language or linguistic text but also visual images, sound and music, so that the humor in a TV sit-com can be shown to audience in an all-round way. Generally speaking, the various modalities can be classified into two categories, namely, the visual modalities and the auditive modalities. The main modalities adopted in the sit-com are the visual modalities which include the image and words. The principal elements in images are brightness, color and action, while the main elements in words are size, color and the types of words. The accompanied modality throughout the sit-com is the actors' costumes, and background sound of the sit-com, as well as the tone and tune. Since the TV sit-com belongs to the dynamic multimodal discourse, it is concerned with not only the multiple semiotic systems, but also presents to the viewer the dynamic nature of modalities in visual and auditive sense. Therefore, the dynamic representation of the integration of different modalities is presented in the following description of the thesis. The description is illustrated in the following figure. (苑琳, 2010:43)

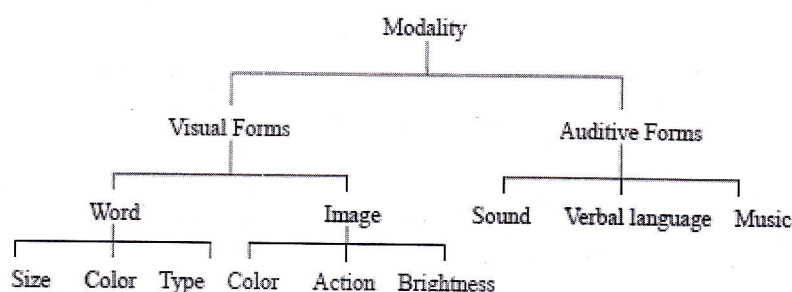


Figure 1 Modality Forms (张德禄, 2009: 25)

#### 2.1.2 Relationship among Different Modalities

It is an easy task to classify various modalities into visual forms and auditive forms, but the relationship between them is not so easy to clarify. The foremost thing confronting us before moving to the relationship between modalities is that why multimodalities are adopted by human-beings in the communication. It is probably that both of them make contributes to the explanation, but the main answer lies in the latter one in most cases, that is, the strengthening, complement, coordination of other modalities when only one modality fails to articulate the meaning of the communicators.

Based on the explanation above, the relationship between different modalities can be classified into two categories, namely, the complementary relationship and the non-complementary relationship. The complementary relationship refers to the complement and strengthening of other modalities to the original modality. Non-complementary relationship means any relationship except the complementary relationship(张德禄, 2009: 26). In the sit-com *The Big Bang Theory*, the relationship between various modalities belongs to the complementary relationship which can be further divided into the strengthening relationship and non-strengthening relationship. The strengthening relationship refers to the fact that one modality comes as the leading modality forms with other modalities playing the strengthening roles for the leading modality, while the non-strengthening relationship refers to the indispensable presence of various modalities, for instance, the combination of the visual modality and auditive modality in the sit-com(张德禄, 2009: 26). The visual modality and auditive modality are blended together to collaboratively make contributes to the integrative meaning of the shots in the sit-com, otherwise it is impossible for the audiences to figure out what the represented participants in the pictures of the sit-com are talking about, let alone understanding some uncommon but sparkling humor.

## 2.2 The Integration of Different Modalities in the Film

There are five obvious kinds of modes of humorous integration in the filmic discourse *The Big Bang Theory*.

The first mode is the integration between words and bodily expressions.

The second mode is the integration between pictures and background sound.

In next chapter, the humor factors in American sit-coms will be illustrated from these above two aspects in details.

### 3. A Case Study of The Big Bang Theory

This chapter will take the second episode of The Big Bang Theory's Season One as an example to further explain humor factors in it, aiming to conduct a practical multimodal analysis on the filmic discourse The Big Bang Theory from two aspects mentioned in previous chapter respectively to provide a proof for readers to digest its humor factors more deeply.

#### 3.1 The integration between words and bodily expressions

The first mode is the integration between words and bodily expressions. As a TV program, a very distinctive feature of the sit-com is that it can offer the audience dynamic and exact movements of roles, causing humor immediately. It cannot be thoroughly described by words, neither. But in sit-coms, this humor is definitely more understandable to viewers together with words.

Here is an example illustration: after seeing the mess in Penny's apartment during the daytime when bringing the spare door to her, Sheldon can't fall asleep at night, for he has a compulsive need to sort, organize and label. Knowing Penny's apartment is in chaos, he comes to her apartment at night. In this scene, Sheldon is doing straightening up by cleaning and organizing while Penny is sleeping. Thanks to Jim Parsons' skillful acting, Sheldon shows a series of waggish bodily movements during the process, at which the audience burst into laughter most. The author believes that if the series of bodily expressions are expressed in literature work and daily life only in words, they couldn't be so humoristic if the readers or the listeners can't understand the language, or lack of imagination.

#### 3.2 The integration between pictures and background sound

The second mode of integration is between pictures and background sound. Since the TV sit-com belongs to the dynamic multimodal discourse, it is concerned with not only the multiple semiotic systems, but also presents to the viewer the dynamic nature of modalities in visual and auditive sense. Sometimes, sound will produce a prominent humor to all the human beings.

Here is an example illustration: in this scene, Leonard knows that he and Sheldon's breaking into Penny's apartment at night to do some cleaning has displeased her very much, so he comes over to apologize. After listening to his apology letter, Penny forgives his misbehave and give him a hug, which delights Leonard. After Penny closes the door, he goes back to his apartment, looking back at Penny's and smiling so that not conscious of his apartment's locked door. And then all of a sudden "bang!" he hits the door. The sound of the hitting door totally contrasts with Leonard current happy mood, making him look innocent and stupid at that time, which makes a hilarious result in the sit-com to most human beings.

### 4. Conclusion

With the multimodal discourse analysis as the theoretical foundation, this thesis analyzes how the humor is conveyed in the sit-com The Big Bang Theory on two fronts. First, this thesis is made to shed new light on the analysis of the American sit-coms by concentrating on other modalities in them besides the verbal one; second, this thesis tries to make up the deficiency by understanding the filmic discourse comprehensively so that the readers can understand how the different kinds of modalities bolster the humor effect in sit-coms.

By making all these analysis, this thesis contributes to enriching the theory of multimodal discourse analysis, enlarging the application of the multimodal discourse analysis to the realization of the humor in sit-coms other than only to linguistic study as well as facilitating a better appreciation for the audiences on the sit-com The Big Bang Theory.

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