An Analysis of Humor in *The Cop and the Anthem* From the Perspective of Relevance Theory

WANG Lingbo[1] and YANG Huiying[2]

[1]School of foreign studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University
Shaanxi, China, Postal code: 710129
Email: wanglingbo029@163.com

[2]School of foreign studies, Northwestern Polytechnical University,
Shaanxi, China, Postal code: 710129
Email: niutingyu@126.com

Corresponding author
WANG Lingbo
Email: wanglingbo029@163.com
Telephone numbers: 86-15609292116

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Abstract

As a special form of speech communication, humor embodies the art of language and has its unique charm. Applying Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson as a framework, this paper explores the humorous effects in *The Cop and the Anthem.* It is found that the differences in the manifesting of the mutual cognitive environment between the communicator and the audience lead to the premise of humor; the contextual assumptions and ostensive-inferential communication provide a reasonable basis for the mechanism of humor production; the factors affecting the strength of the humorous effect depend mainly on the contrast between the maximal relevance and optimal relevance and are influenced by the processing effort and cognitive effects.

Key words: Relevance Theory, *The Cop and the Anthem*, humor

1. Introduction

Humor is one of the sources of immortal artistic charm of literature, and a kind of satire with light-hearted tone but profound meaning. Despite its complex characteristics, humor has been favored by numerous scholars in the fields of literature, sociology, psychology and linguistics in recent years. Its theoretical viewpoints and achievements have been constantly updated and improved. It is noteworthy that, with the development and maturation of linguistics, especially pragmatics, humor has become a hot spot with practical value and theoretical research significance.

As a distinguished American critical realist writer, O. Henry is known as Prose Laureate of Manhattan and the father of modern American short stories. He is expert in constructing the humorous style of his works with witty language, novel conception and outstanding suspense techniques, so as to imply deep meaning with humor and achieve the purpose of criticizing the hard reality. In *The Cop and the Anthem*, humor runs through the plot as a means of conveying the author's thoughts. The ingenuity of the ideas reflected in this short story, the depth of its artistic merit and the vividness of its humorous effect cannot fail to amaze, and it has therefore been loved and recommended by readers worldwide.

Relevance Theory is a cognitive pragmatic theory, which is jointly proposed by Sperber and Wilson. It analyzes discourse theory in verbal communication based on the concept of relevance and relevance principle. They believe that verbal communication is actually a cognitive process, which is carried out through ostensive-inferential communication. Some basic concepts put forward by Relevance Theory, such as the nature of communication, dynamic context, maximum relevance and optimal relevance, mutual manifestness and the relationship between cognitive context and processing effort, provide powerful explanations for the understanding of humor.

Based on Relevance Theory, this paper mainly discusses how is the humorous effect produced in *The Cop and the Anthem*. The author will analyze the humor in the short story from three aspects: ostensive-inferential communication, the contrast between maximal relevance and optimal relevance, and dynamic context and cognitive assumptions, in order to prove the strong explanatory power and positive significance of Relevance Theory.

This paper is of great significance in the following two aspects: For one thing, in a practical sense, the author hopes that this research can help people better understand the nature, production mechanism and cognitive process of humor, so as to improve people's ability to generate and appreciate humor. At the same time, it is hoped that it can also promote people's attention to humor in cross-cultural communication and enlighten English language learning. For another, theoretically, Relevance Theory provides a new scientific perspective for the study of humor. Through this case study, the author hopes to reveal the rationality and applicability of Relevance Theory to the interpretation of humor. Meanwhile, this paper aims to fill the gap in the field of humorous analysis of *The Cop and the Anthem* under Relevance Theory and offer a valid reference value with the help of cognitive pragmatics knowledge, such as cognitive context, maximal relevance and optimal relevance, pragmatic presupposition and so on.

2 Literature review
2.1 Humor
2.1.1 Definition of humor

The term humor is derived from the "humoral medicine" of the ancient Greeks, meaning "fluid". Ancient physiologists believed that humors were one of human body fluids (blood, phlegm, yellow bile, black bile) which determined a person's mind, temperament, character and disposition. It was said that the proper balancing of these fluids caused a person with "good humor" or "well-humored". With the lapse of the long centuries, it gradually came to refer to one's mood and state of mind. As time went by, the original meaning of humor was becoming vaguer. And finally the word is applied to those who could "provoke laughter at the oddities and the incongruities of life" (Cai & Yin, 2005).

Although the studies of humor have been carried out for a long time, there is no universally acknowledged definition of humor. Various definitions of humor exist for the reason that humor is complex and multifaceted in nature, and it is impossible at this time to simultaneously propose a broad theory that satisfactorily explains several key qualities of humor (McGhee, 1979).

By referring to some authoritative and influential dictionaries, humor is defined as: "Capacity to cause or bring amusement" in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1978:558). "The quality in something that seems funny and enables human to laugh; the ability to be amused and think something is amusing; a state of mind, mood." in *Longman*

Dictionary of Contemporary English (1978:709). In *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and Thesaurus* (2003), it is defined as: (1)That quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous. (2)The mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous. (3)Something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing. With reference to some scholars, Mindess views humor as "a frame of mind, a manner of perceiving and experiencing life", " a kind of outlook, a peculiar point of view and one which has great therapeutic power (Mindess, 1971). Kant believes humor derives from the inconsistency between the hearer's expectancy and reality (Attardo, 1997) . Koller holds that "Humor is universally a human quality that finds events, circumstances, behavior, situations, or the expression of thoughts to be funny, joyous, absurd, ludicrous, hilarious, laughable, amusing, clever and possibly instructive (Koller, 1988)". And as Palmer argues that "humor is everything that is actually or potentially funny and humor is also the processes by which this 'funniness' creates (Palmer, 1994)."

Certainly, there are still many other definitions about humor. However, up to now, the definition of humor has not reached a consensus in the academic circle. Based on the definitions mentioned above, the author attempts to summarize some common features of humor: firstly, the essence of humor is funny and it mainly aims to make something laughable or amuse people. Secondly, there must be some deep meanings in humor which enables people to think about something. Thirdly, it can be referred to a state of mind or a kind of contextual effects. Thus, the paper will make a research on humor to better explore this multiple-meaning term.

2.1.2 Classification of humor

Just as humor theorists have given different definitions from different perspectives, the classification of humor varies according to different criteria. McGhee once pointed out "there has been widespread disagreement through the centuries about how many kinds of humor exist" (McGhee, 1979). Till now, there is no any standard to classify humor and it may be classified based on various purposes and in many ways. However, many scholars have put forward their own views on the classification of humor and have achieved relative acceptance:

The classification of humor by Bergson remains as an extremely influential one in which he categorized humor into two types: situational humor and language or verbal humor (Bergson, 1911). Specifically, situational humor is the humor whose amusement has to depend on the situation or the occasion. It is usually put in a certain context, on which the humorous effect is normally showed by impersonation, imitation and camouflage. While language humor or verbal humor is the humor expressed through spoken or written language, which is highly associated with language. In this case, language is not only a tool to take down the amusing things but also a source creating humor. Verbal humor is the artistic effect

of exposing the "disharmony" in people's daily life through rhetorical means such as puns, metaphors, and irony with the help of language, a special medium, and combined with the specific context at the same time, which produces profound meaning and provokes people's thinking (Li, 1996). Freud considers that humor basically covers two branches: conceptual and verbal humor, and humor is categorized into tendentious ones and innocent ones if the purpose of humor is touched upon (Freud, 1962). Koller comes up with ideas to classify humor from social perspective, such as religious, educational, political, occupational, family, medical, and sports humor (Koller, 1988). According to Palmer, unscripted humor and comic texts are the main kinds of humor (Palmer, 2003). It should be noted that any language itself is not a sense of humor. Humor can be truly appreciated only when the language is combined with a specific context and expressed thoughts to gain consistency from the incongruity in humorous utterances.

2.1.3 Classical theories of humor

Humor is an ancient research topic, which can be traced back to the time of Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, and has been constantly revised, tested and developed in the following centuries. Humor has been studied in a variety of ways, with three main traditional theoretical categories: Superiority Theory from the perspective of social behavior; Release Theory from a psychoanalytical perspective and Incongruity Theory from a psycho-cognitive perspective.

Among these three theories, Superiority Theory demonstrates a bad mentality of speech coders, Release Theory focuses on the effect of information transmission, and Incongruity Theory is the most influential one, which unifies and connects the disharmonious or uncoordinated objects in the brain in a certain way. Only the third theory deals with the generation mechanism of humor.

Superiority Theory. The focus of this theory is the interpersonal and social aspect of humor, dating back to the time of Plato. Plato once claimed that humor is people's malice towards the relatively incompetent. He held the views that malice or envy is the central part in humor. Aristotle, on the other hand, regarded comedy as an imitation of the inferior. Thomas Hobbes, as the noticeable representative of this school, further elaborated on this idea, pointing to the role of superiority in humour in his synthetic analysis of the scope of human emotions and feelings. He considers laughter as the expression of a sudden realization of one's superiority over others, and believes that "the passion of laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising, form some sudden concept of some eminency in ourselves, by comparing with the infirmity of others, or our own formerly (Hobbes, 1962)". The criticism of Hobbes, however, is mainly fells on two aspects: firstly, this theory is too narrow to cover all types of humor; and secondly, his theory of superiority seems to ignore a very important feature of humour--incongruity, the so-called dissonance.

Release Theory. As the name implies, this theory refers to the use of humor to release the feelings of oppression and tension of individuals in social group, which can be seen as a kind of self-defense. The theory is came up by Herbert Spence, an English philosopher in the 19th century, and later developed by Sigmund Freud. Freud is the main representative of Release Theory. According to him, humor is the result of "jumble up things that are different" (Freud, 1960). Laughter is the release of tension and depression caused by social pressure. Psychic energy is accumulating in the human body, no longer useful, and must be released. This release is spontaneous and can be expressed through laughter. In Freudian terms, the word "humor" is qualified as a comic interpretation built on the basis of the conscious superego, while "joke" is based on the unconscious (Freud, 1976). However, Freud's work does not deal with the structure of humour perception, but rather with the impact of humour perception on human emotional or affective life and its relation to Freud's theory of psychological construction. In other words, Freud's theory of humour is actually be seen as a theory of laughter.

Incongruity Theory, also known as disharmony theory, which plays a leading role in the research on the contemporary psychological aspects of humor, is the most influential theory in the study of humor and laughter. Beattie's definition of incongruity is widely cited, he thinks that "laughter arises form the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object or assemblage (as cited in Ritchie, 2004)". Kant, in the 18th century, is considered to be the first person to give a complete definition of humor from an incongruous point of view. He noted that humor comes from "the sudden transformation from expectation to nothing (Attardo, 1997)", and that humor is contradiction between what one expects and what one gets. Schopenhauer explicitly refers to incongruity or discord in his definition of laughter: "In every instance, the cause of laughter is nothing more than the sudden sensation of incongruity between a concept and the real thing represented by this concept, and laughter itself is the manifestation of this discord (Attardo, 1997)". Humor appears when two seemingly inconsistent ideas or thought collide in an unusual and sudden way. As the word "incongruity" shows, it refers to the asymmetrical paradoxical situations. Moron thinks "humor is to integrate a thing in one context to another and it's the combination of totally different things (Moron, 1951)". Many other scholars argue that it is not the disharmony itself that is funny, but the resolution of the superficially dissonant harmony that makes a certain scene ridiculous.

Compared with the other two theories, Incongruity Theory is considered as the most influential one because it studies humor from the perspective of human cognition for the first time. It covers the psychological process of humor and provides a general model for the interpretation of humor.

2.2 Previous studies on humor

2.2.1 Related studies on humor in the West

The upsurge of humor theory research sprang up in the 1870s. Most of the early studies started from the aspects of medicine, psychology and sociology to explore the role of humor in people's psychological intervention. On the basis of the three classical theories, the modern research on humor is more inclined to the perspectives of linguistics and rhetoric, among which the research achievements of linguistics are the most abundant and prolific.

The Semantic Mechanism of Humor, written by Raskin in 1985, is a great achievement in the study of humor theory. In the book, Raskin put forward the famous "Semantic Script Theory of humor" based on incongruity theory. On this basis, in 1991, Raskin and Salvatore Attardo further proposed the "general theory of verbal humor", which introduced five humor sources from low to high with reference to script concept, and formed the antagonism of script through humor sources, which was an important breakthrough in the study of humor theory. In 1975, Herbert Paul Grice, an American language philosopher, proposed four specific principles of the cooperation principle in his book *Logic and Conversation*, and believed that the effect of humor came from the abnormal application of the maxims in the Cooperative principle. Building on Grice's ideas, Carrell put forward the Theory of Verbal Humor, arguing that humour does not exist in the language itself, but in the sensations of the audience. Humour cannot be studied in isolation from its creator, the speech, the audience and the context, but on the combination of various factors. *Laughter and the Sense of Humor*, published in 1980, is Edmund Bogle's major work on Humor. He believed that the greatest effect of humor on adults was that it could protect people from mental abuse, and divides the source of sense of humor into four parts: wit, humor, self-mockery and black humor. These scholars' researches on humor from different perspectives has promoted the development of the field of humor, and also provided valuable reference materials for us.

2.2.2 Related studies on humor in China

Since the 1980s, with the continuous introduction of Western humor theory translations, China has gradually started to attach importance to the humor studies. Similar to the complexity and diversity of western research perspectives, the humor studies in China also cover the research of humor generation mechanism, speech understanding and application. The perspective of humor research spans many disciplines, including linguistics, rhetoric, pragmatics and logic. However, due to the short research history, it is inevitable that a complete and systematic research system has not been formed and there are some problems such as the relatively one-sided research angle.

Regarding humor as a rhetorical device is an early viewpoint in the study of humor. *Humor Linguistics*, written by Hu Fanzhu in 1987, was hailed as "the most important achievement of humor research in Chinese linguistic circle". Although in today's perspective,

some specific interpretations are inevitably not novel or creative, and some theories are restricted by the times, which are difficult to break through the framework of rhetoric, this book is the first systematic study of humor theory. Other research articles are numerous, such as *A Survey on Chinese and English Writing Systems in the Delivery of Humor* (Wei, 2014). From the perspective of linguistics, *The Linguistic Thinking of Verbal Humor* published by Huang Hao in 2007 probes into the mechanism by which humor makes people laugh, and analyzes Incongruity Theory in humor psychology by combining the theories of linguistics, lexicology, syntax, stylistics and pragmatics with speeches of celebrities as corpus. There are also articles such as *The Analysis of Language Mechanism of Humor Formation* (Cui, 2008). The introduction of humor into pragmatics is a new research trend emerged in recent years. For example, Liu Naishi's *A Graphical Model of Verbal Humor* in 2008 is a typical one written by English. Based on the traditional linguistic research, this book puts forward and improves the "Architecture of a Reduced Graph Model of Jokes(RGMJ)"(Liu, 2008), which presents a new approach for humor text research. In 2012, Zhang Lixin published his *An Interactive Model of Affect and Cognition to Construe Visual and Verbal Humors-- A Functional and Cognitive Research of Multi-modal Humor*, starting with the visual and auditory humor, analyzes and discusses the physiological mechanism, type characteristics, procedures, linguistic symbolic expressions, interaction process of humor participants and socio-cultural contexts of humor sequentially. In terms of research results from the perspective of logic, Wang Jianping's *Humor and Logical Wisdom* in 1992 is one of the earliest works on humor theory. This book starts with the analysis of humor examples, and explores the connotation and logical context of humor works according to the logic principles. *Joke, Humor and Logic*, published by Tan Darong in 2011, seems to be a study of humor science. But in fact, it is actually more inclined to study the connotation and denotation of logic, formal logic and concepts with the help of the platform of humorous texts.

According to the relevant materials, the author finds two characteristics: first, the domestic study of humor focuses on linguistics, but the research results from aesthetics, philosophy and psychology are also rich and fruitful; second, in the study of humor, a single humor theory research is rarely adopted, and a multidisciplinary and cooperative research method is most suitable for the study of humor theory. However, at the same time, the author also finds that there are still deficiencies in our researchers on language humor. In terms of research content, on the one hand, we focus on certain kinds of theories (such as Relevance Theory, Conversational Principle, Systemic Functional Grammar, conceptual integration, semantic framework, etc.), and the research horizon of humor is not broad enough; on the other hand, nearly half of the research results are aimed at certain special types of humorous texts, and the exploration of the universal linguistic mechanism of humor is still insufficient.

2.3 Previous researches on O. Henry and *The Cop and the Anthem*

O. Henry is a well-known humorous novelist, and his works have been studied from different perspectives, including rhetoric, aesthetics, narrative structure, humanistic themes, humorous language, character portraying and unexpected endings, etc. In China, the study of O. Henry's works has not yet formed a system, and few studies have been conducted from pragmatics.

At present, most of the studies on O. Henry's works are from the perspective of literary criticism, focusing on the social, cultural and other aspects of the impact of his works and its practical significance. The humorous style of his works has been widely studied and recognized in literary criticism. For example, in CNKI, to name just a few, there are articles analyzing the artistic expressive features of his short stories (Zhou Yaqiong 2009), the narrative feature (Lin Xueping 2008) as well as the textual patterns (Wang Hui and Yu Liyan 2010). In addition, Wang Qiaoshan and Wang Feng (2006) studied the lexical patterns in O. Henry's short story *The Cop and the Anthem*. That paper also analyzes the role of these lexical patterns in revealing the discourse themes and personalities of figures of the story. Besides, some scholars have begun to study O. Henry's works from some new perspectives. For instance, Ji Pingli (2006) applies Functional Stylistic to the study of O. Henry's works; Yang Fengling (2019) made an analysis of personalities of the characters in O. Henry's short stories from a functional stylistic perspective.

However, most of the current studies have not made a detailed analysis of the linguistic forms and their functions of humor in O. Henry's works from a linguistic perspective. There is almost no research in this area on what linguistic forms O. Henry purposefully used and how they were interpreted by readers to realize the humorous effect of his works.

3 Research methodology
3.1 Research questions

The paper aims to answer the following questions:
1. How is the humorous effect produced in this short story?
2. Based on Relevance Theory, what steps should be followed to interpret humor?
3. What are the obstacles in understanding humor?

3.2 Research methods and procedures

This thesis uses various research methods, including text analysis, qualitative research, comparative method, inductive method, exemplification, as well as literature research, to put forward a case study on the analysis of humor in *The Cop and the Anthem*.

The complete research steps and procedures of this paper are as follows: First, collect and read a wide range of materials and articles related to Relevance Theory and humor. Second, accurately understand the important concepts in Relevance Theory and be able to

apply them to practice. Third, classify and sort out humor in the story. Fourth, based on Relevance Theory, from three aspects, namely ostensive-inferential communication, the contrast between maximal relevance and optimal relevance, and dynamic context and cognitive assumptions, to analyze how does the humor effect come into being, what cognitive processes readers experience with humor, and what factors may hinder the realization of humor. Finally, summarize all the research results and draw conclusions.

3.3 Theoretical framework--Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory is built upon the Conversational Implicature Theory and Cooperative Principle of communication proposed by Grice in 1967. On this basis, Wilson and Sperber published *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1986, which first put forward Relevance Theory. The book not only gives an account of the predecessor and development of Relevance Theory, but also discusses the core issues of inference and relevance, and selectively involves how to use Relevance Theory to explain linguistic phenomena in several aspects of verbal communication.

3.4.1 Ostensive-inferential communication

The concept of "communication" is the center and premise of understanding RT. With the emphasis on the combination of the Code Model and the Inferential Model and by drawing the theoretical source of cognitive theory from *The Unit Structure of Human Brain* by A. J. Ford, Sperber and Wilson put forward the Communicative View of Relevance Theory in their works, laying stress on the notion of Ostensive-inferential Communication, regarding there are two aspects of communication: ostensive and inference. According to Sperber and Wilson, in the Ostensive-inferential mode, the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). In other words, for the communicator, communication is an ostensive process, i.e., to display the informative intention clearly; while for the audience, communication is an inferential process, i.e., based on the communicator's ostensive behavior and combined with the contextual assumptions, to obtain the context effect and to learn the communicator's communicative intention.

3.4.2 Definition of relevance: relating it to context

Wilson and Sperber believe that the information selection of people in communication is made based on "relevance". In the actual process of verbal communication, both the communicator and the audience choose information with strong relevance, discard information that is weakly relevant, and exclude information that is irrelevant according to their cognition. They define "relevance" as "an assumption is relevant in a context if and only

if it has some contextual effect in that context (Sperber & Wilson, 2001)." This definition clearly shows the important relationship between relevance and context as well as contextual meaning. In addition, Sperber and Wilson also expand on the issue of the degree of relevance and two important factors that affect utterance relevance, thus improving the original definition of "relevance" with an extent-conditions format:

Extent condition 1: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

Extent condition 2: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small (Sperber & Wilson, 2001).

This definition makes it clear that assumptions with contextual effects are more relevant when other conditions are being equal, and, similarly, that assumptions requiring less processing effort are more relevant.

3.4.3 Principles of relevance

Sperber and Wilson proposed two basic principles of Relevance Theory: The first is the Cognitive Principle: "Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance." To better understand this principle, we need to first recognize that our cognitive resources tend to be allocated to processing the most relevant inputs available, whether from internal (hypothetical) or external (stimulus) sources. That is to say, human cognition tends to maximize the cumulative relevance of the inputs it processes. Instead of pursuing a long-term strategy based on the cumulative relevance obtained over a period of time, it is realized through "local arbitrations", with the purpose of competing for immediately available resources among simultaneously available inputs to get incremental gains. The cognitive principle makes people's cognitive behavior predictable enough to guide communication. In this case, maximal relevance can be defined as follows: the more (stronger) the cognitive effects, the relevance (given the same amount of processing effort); the less processing effort, the greater the relevance (given the same cognitive effects). Or put it simply, it means "the greatest possible effects for the smallest possible efforts"(Higashimori &Wilson, 1996). So we can come up with a formula, that is: Relevance=Cognitive Effects / Processing Effort.

The second is the Communication Principle, which is grounded in the cognitive principle of relevance: "Every act of ostensive communication communicate a presumption of its own optimal relevance." In 1995, Sperber and Wilson revise presumption of optimal relevance as follows: (a) The ostensive stimulus is relevance enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it. (b) The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communication's abilities and preferences. With reference to communicative principle, communication is simply the creation of an expectation of optimal relevance, i.e, "adequate effects for no unjustifiable efforts (Higashimori &Wilson, 1996)". That is, every utterance carries with an assumption of the best balance between the gain of cognitive effects and the

expense of processing efforts. On the one hand, the achievable effects are never less than those worth processing. On the other hand, the effort required will never exceed what is needed to achieve those effects. Compared with the results achieved, the effort required is always minimal. This is equivalent to saying that of all the interpretations of the stimulus that confirm this presumption, it is the first one that the communicator intends to convey.

3.4.4 Dynamic context

Referring to Relevance Theory, context is "a psychological construct that are manifest to the perceiver", "a subset of the hearer's assumptions about the world" and "the set of premises used in interpreting an utterance". It includes not only the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances, but also factors such as one's knowledge and one's cognitive abilities (Sperber &Wilson, 2001). As stated by Sperber and Wilson, context is dynamic as a fluid notion, which means that it is constantly supplemented and expanded in the process of communication. As for the choice, adjustment and confirmation of context, however, are always dominated by the relevance principles.

Although the cognitive environment varies from person to person, due to the relative convergence in the physical world in which people live and some common cognitive abilities, there are some certain cognitive environments that may be mutually manifested between the communicator and the audience, known as "mutual cognitive environment" (Sperber &wilson, 1996). Mutual cognitive environment is the premise of communication, being of great significance in utterance understanding. The success or failure of communication between the speaker and the hearer is decided by their access to each other's cognitive environment. The formation of context is a process of constant selection, inference and adjustment, which is changeable and dynamic. In this process, the main purpose of the speaker is to provide the most relevant information about the hearer's cognitive environment. The hearer, in turn, is supposed to process the new information and assumptions offered by the speaker, and gradually change his cognitive environment, so as to search for the context that satisfies the relevance and obtain the optimal relevance.

4 Discussion and Analysis

This study mainly focuses on verbal humor as mentioned in Section 2. In order to make the analysis of verbal humor (or language humor) more convincing, this paper refers to 23 humorous passages in *The Cop and the Anthem*, as summarized by He Lucheng (2017) through a questionnaire survey conducted among English learners.

4.1 Relevance theoretic account of the interpretation of humor in *The Cop and the Anthem*

4.1.1 From the perspective of ostensive-inferential communication

Ostensive communication refers to producing a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience, and it is obviously the intentional communication of human beings. In communication, the communicator indicates his intention through ostension, and then the receiver infers the communicator's intention. In order to attract readers' curiosity to continue reading, O. Henry provides readers with more information through ostension. The plan and whole process of Soapy's several attempts to get arrested is arranged in a delicate way, so as to guide the readers to refer to the relevant cognitive context, search for relevance, and make inferences.

The coming winter is described at the beginning of the story of *The Cop and the Anthem*: "A dead leaf fell in Soapy's lap. That was Jack Frost's card. Jack is kind to the regular denizens of Madison Square, and gives fair warning of his annual call. At the corners of four streets he hands his pasteboard to the North Wind, footman of the mansion of All Outdoors, so that the inhabitants thereof may make ready."

"Jack Frost" is an anthropomorphic name for "frost". Through "Jack Frost's Card", "Jack is kind", "He hands his pasteboard" and other ostensive messages which highlights the friendly, gentlemanly and considerate characteristics of winter, readers can fully utilize the encyclopedia knowledge stored in their brain to generate the optimal relevance. The story also introduces the "hospitable" Blackwell Island prison, which has been Soapy's winter shelter:

"Three months on the Island was what his soul craved. Three months of assured board and bed and congenial company, safe from Boreas and blue coats,seemed to Soapy the essence of things desirable." O. Henry chooses such warm and wonderful words to describe the cold winter, and we know that "winter quarters" generally refers to a comfortable place for people to escape from the coldness, but Soapy uses his "winter quarters" to represent prison-- these are the ostensive information provided by O. Henry. This obviously contradicts people's common sense about winter and prison, and is contrary to the reader's inference. So the reader has to pay extra efforts to seek the optimal relevance between language and context.

Therefore, in the ostensive-inferential communication constructed between the communicator and the reader, the O. Henry's real communicative intention is completely contrary to the information that the reader obtains from ostensive information by inference-- "the gentle winter wind and the comfortable prison". Under the vividly depiction with the O. Henry's satirical pen, the readers step by step understand the difference between the ostensive information and the communicative intention, infer the cognitive information in accordance with the context, so as to achieve the strong contrast effect of humor, and have a true grasp of

the absurdity of capitalist society and the author's resentment and dissatisfaction against this inequality.

4.1.2 From the contrast of maximal and optimal relevance

The two most important principles of Relevance Theory are maximal relevance and optimal relevance. The ostensive-inferential process in communication is inseparable from these two principles. Owing to the dynamic nature of the context, the reader has to give up the maximal relevance based on the previous contextual assumption and make extra cognitive effort to obtain the optimal relevance. When there is an inconsistency between maximal relevance and optimal relevance, the audience will choose the optimal relevance to solve the incongruity, thus producing a humorous effect. The sharper the incongruity, the greater the humorous effect. So is the appreciation of humorous short stories.

The following is an excerpt from Soapy's dialogue with the police and the waiter to analyze the relationship between the contrast of maximal relevance and optimal relevance and the linguistic effect of humor.

Example 1: "Where's the man that done that?" inquired the officer excitedly.

"Don't you figure out that I might have had something to do with it?" said Soapy, not without sarcasm, but friendly, as one greets good fortune.

This is Soapy talking to the police after he smashes the window with a stone and stands still waiting for the police to arrive. From the police's question, we can infer that the police just wants to know some information about that, and does not consider Soapy to be a suspect. According to the cognitive principle of Relevance Theory, we know that readers expect to get the most possible cognitive results with the least effort. In this context, when interrogated by the police, most people is supposed to vehemently deny, so we deduce a denial answer from Soapy. And when Soapy says, "Don't you figure out that I might have had something to do with it?", this utterance contradicts the reader's presumption of maximal relevance: Soapy even frankly admits that everything is done by himself. Therefore, readers have to believe that the sentences in the story have the optimal relevance instead. Abandoning the assumption originally obtained by the maximal relevance, the reader tends to look for the author's real intention with the development of the story plot. Here, the contrast of maximal and optimal relevance is manifested to create a humorous contextual effect to demonstrate Soapy's eagerness to be put in prison, thus exposing the ignorance of the police and the absurdity of the society.

Example 2: "Now, get busy and call a cop," said Soapy. "And don't keep a gentleman waiting."

"No cop for youse,"said the waiter, with a voice like butter cakes and an eye like the cherry in a Manhattan cocktail. "Hey, Con!"

This is Soapy confessing to the waiter that he is penniless after a hearty meal in a

restaurant. Under the principle of maximal relevance, the reader's first expectation is that Soapy will try to escape, but surprisingly, Soapy initiatively asks the waiter to call the police. In this case, there is a conflict between the prediction of maximal relevance and the information provided, so the reader is forced to reconsider the author's intention to determine the optimal relevance, and conclude that Soapy deliberately provokes the anger of the waiter in order to achieve his goal of going to prison. The waiter's response also makes the reader unexpected, leading us to guess that the waiter is kind-hearted. But the information provided later-- that Soapy is thrown into the street unsympathetically-- once again gives us an insight into the humorous effect of the conflict and the incongruity between maximal and optimal relevance.

4.1.3 From the perspective of dynamic context and changing cognitive assumptions

Sperber and Wilson argue that context is a psychological construct and a subset of the listener's assumptions about the world. In view of the relevance and development of new and old information, when contextual effect is produced, contextual assumptions are modified, reinforced, or overturned accordingly. Therefore, the context of relevance can be considered as a dynamic context that is constantly changing. Humor is generated by new information that changes or overturns the original contextual assumptions. If the new information only reinforces the old information, the original assumptions remain. The humor effect is small when the humor recipient uses less cognitive effort to justify his or her assumptions. However, if the new information contradicts the original assumptions, or when the old information disproves the original assumptions, the receiver must find relevance through extra cognitive efforts, and eventually he will enjoy humor in return.

In *The Cop and the Anthem*, new information emerges constantly, disrupting the readers' thinking and subverting their contextual assumptions. By reading the beginning of the story, the reader is given information about when the story takes place, the status of the protagonist, Soapy, and the hard situation he faces. Based on this, the reader may have the following assumptions: (1) Due to the cold weather, Soapy will die in winter. (2) To survive, Soapy may seek help from charity.

But as the reader continues to read, he finds that Soapy's choice is beyond his expectation. Instead of accepting "the hands of philanthropy", Soapy intends to spend the winter in prison. The new information disproves and overturns the reader's original contextual assumptions. Then some new assumptions emerges: (1) Soapy will try to be put in prison. (2) Soapy could easily go to jail. (3) Trying to be arrested, Soapy may does some immoral things in an attempt to break the law.

At first, Soapy hopes to get arrested and be sent to jail by going to a fancy restaurant for a free meal; the second time, he smashes a store window with a pebble; the third time, after a big meal in an ordinary restaurant, he shows that he has no money to pay for it; the fourth

time, Soapy pretends to be a ruffian rogue and molests a young woman; the fifth time, Soapy thinks of the crime of "disorderly conduct"; in a last-ditch effort, his intention is to become an umbrella thief. Yet all of these seemingly promising attempts end in failure. Soapy's failed attempts once again become a new piece of information that changes the reader's assumptions. With the elimination of the old contextual assumptions, new ones are formed: (1) Soapy is out of luck. (2) Soapy will continue his mission. (3) It is not easy to go to jail.

Going through constant failure, Soapy is very depressed. Until Soapy hears the anthem in front of the church, he is so deeply moved that he resolves to to turn over a new life and envisions a better future. The new information overturns the reader's contextual assumption again, and the reader may come up with new assumptions: (1) Soapy gives up the idea of going to prison. (2) Soapy will get a job and work for his new life.

With new assumptions, the reader continues to the end. Soapy is finally arrested. The ending of this story turns out to be a complete surprise to the reader, and it also overturns all of the above assumptions. Throughout the reading process, the reader always have contextual assumptions, but these assumptions will change again and again as new information is provided. So it can be said that the cognitive assumption is not fixed, nor is it chosen at the beginning of the reading. It is changeable and dynamic. It is precisely this kind of contextual assumption that is constantly overturning and establishing, then being overthrown again, which creates a huge contrast, and the humorous effect naturally comes into being.

4.2 Concrete steps of the interpretation of humor in short stories

Through the analysis of the effect of humor mentioned above, this part will explore the specific steps of humor interpretation from the perspective of Relevance Theory.

Step 1 Making contextual assumptions about how the story is going to develop when reading the beginning of the story

Humor interpretation is a special ostensive-inferential communication. During the reading process, the author continuously gives the reader ostension stimulus, guiding the reader to infer according to the reserved knowledge and to form the contextual assumptions.

Step 2 New information contradicting the original assumptions and forming new contextual assumptions

Contextual assumptions are not fixed, nor are they chosen at the beginning of interpretation; they are dynamic and change as new information is added. As the author presents new message, the readers will find that the story does not develop as they have expected. At this time, the new information conflicts with the original assumptions, the reader will consciously establish new contextual assumptions.

Step 3 Encountering an unexpected ending and realizing being misled
With reference to the communicative principle of relevance, the author's ostensive intention implies the optimal relevance. When the reader encounters the surprising development of the

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story, he tends to believe that the "irrelevant" information may be sufficiently relevant to the author's true intention. This is exemplified by the "O. Henry-style ending", which is known for the surprising ending of its stories. *The Cop and the Anthem* is no exception. When it comes to the last part of the story, there is often a great contrast with the preceding foreshadowing.

Step 4 Reinterpreting the story and finding the optimal relevance

In our actual communication, people often do not strictly abide by the principle of the maximal relevance and the optimal relevance. To achieve humor, the communicator usually breaks the rules and uses less relevant information. This incongruity, contrary to the optimal relevance, requires the audience to pay extra efforts to understand and figure out the true meaning of the communicator. This situation often results in unexpected humorous effect, which will prompt the reader to exert himself to search for the optimal relevance, infer the communicator's implicature and attitude, and obtain the additional contextual effect-- humor.

However, the contrast between the maximal relevance and the optimal relevance should be moderate, so that the audience can find the optimal relevance and understand the connotation of humor after making a certain effort, otherwise the interpretation of humor effect can not be realized.

Step 5 Realizing the communicative intention of the author

The author has a disposition to choose the best relevant ostensive stimulus to achieve his communicative intention, so he will deliberately structure the humorous effect and use a surprising ending to lead the reader to reinterpret the story. Understanding humor is not only about what the author is telling and what is implied, but also about what themes and values the author is trying to convey and what the author's communicative intention is.

4.3 The obstacles in understanding humor

A successful understanding of humor can be regarded as a successful communication. However, what factors can hinder the understanding of humorous utterances? Combined with the short story of *The Cop and the Anthem*, there are two main categories of causes leading to the failure in the understanding of humor：

The first is the language-based obstacles. The production and understanding of humor is an ostensive-inferential process. Successful humor interpretation is necessarily based on the linguistic decoding first. Therefore, correctly understanding the meaning of a language in humorous utterances is the starting step in understanding humorous language. In *The Cop and the Anthem*, there are many words or allusions with American common sense and Western cultural characteristics. For example, Blackwell, Palm Beach and the Riviera, "As Cesar had his Brutus", Manhattan cocktail, Arcadia, and even the anthem of churches which is unfamiliar to Chinese readers. If there are obstacles in understanding these language expressions, then the description of O. Henry's plot and theme in the story may have a strong

possibility to confuse readers, and it will be impossible to make reasonable inferences, find connections, and experience humor.

The second is inference ability-based and contextual obstacles. Language barriers relate to a single sentence, but contextual barriers determine the meaning of the entire text. Thus, access to contextual information is crucial to understanding humorous discourse, and misinterpretation of contextual information may lead to failure of humor. Furthermore, optimal relevance suggests that the ostensive stimulus is the most relevant stimulus that matches the communicator's competence and preference. That is, the author will provide ostensive information and try to make it palatable and acceptable to the reader. However, if the reader's inference ability is below the author's estimate, it may cause difficulties to understand the author's real intention and taste humor. For example, "Up Broadway he turned, and halted at a glittering café, where are gathered together nightly the choicest products of the grape, the silkworm and the protoplasm." In this case, O. Henry uses fine products like grapes, silkworms, and protoplasm to replace wine, gorgeous clothes and high-class people in a humorous way. To understand the true meaning, the reader should deduce and make associations by himself while reading. If the reader cannot infer and grasp the relevance, he will not be able to appreciate the effect of humor in this particular context.

5. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the humor in American humorist O. Henry's *The Cop and the Anthem* from the perspective of Relevance. In response to the three research questions in this paper, the author briefly presents the research results as follows:

In terms of how humor comes into being, it suggests that O. Henry takes full advantage of the reader's cognitive tendency at the beginning of the story, misleads the reader with a dynamic plot to achieve maximal relevance and satisfy the expected contextual assumptions, paving the way for the emergence of incongruity. In the incongruity stage, O. Henry utilizes ostensive stimulus to overturn the reader's previous contextual assumptions, resulting in the appearance of incongruity and forcing the reader to infer. After understanding the ending of the story, the reader, in the process of reasoning, must give up the maximal relevance and search for the optimal relevance, at which point the focus is on the contrast between the maximal relevance and the optimal relevance. Finally, through extra cognitive effort, the reader achieves the best contextual effect, i.e., the humorous effect, and at the same time realizes the intention of O. Henry's writing. The process of producing and interpreting humorous effect is actually an ostentatious-inferential communication process. As for the humor interpretation, it is a relevance-searching, processing effort-demanding, and cognitive effects-manifestion process.

Inevitably, there are some limitations to this research: Firstly, this paper analyzes humor in short stories from the perspective of Relevance Theory, which involves human cognition.

However, this phenomenon is too complex and difficult to describe, so the research in this paper may not be deep, comprehensive and detailed enough. Secondly, as for the obstacles that affect readers' understanding of humor, this paper only analyzes the obstacles based on language and inference ability, which are too broad to explore the influence of other specific factors on the realization of humor. It is hoped that future research can make up for and improve these two aspects.

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