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A Study on Gender Difference in Conversational Joking of  
Chinese Hosts

汉语主持人会话幽默的性别差异研究

郑 惠 瑛

指导教师姓名: 王善平 副教授

专业名称: 英语语言文学

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## Synopsis

This thesis is concerned with the relationship between gender and conversational joking styles. It delves into the research on humor and gender, focuses on a subcategory of humor – conversational joking, analyzes all humor moves for formal characteristics and functional features in hosting language, highlights distinct features of hosts' and hostesses' humorous interactions and positive effects of teasing, suggests the two major functions of conversational joking – identity display and relational identity display, and discusses the construction of gender through humor.

Conversational joking or situational humor has been regarded as a double-edged sword that both diffuses and controls conflict, which is much determined by the topic, the situation, and the interlocutors involved. Teases directed at others and self-directed humors are perhaps the most vulnerable in this regard. They present the greatest interpersonal risk. Teasing intended as kidding maybe taken as an insult, and self-directed joking may be considered as a confession of inadequacy with the exception that interlocutors know each other well. People extend and build on one another's humorous comments when they are familiar with each other, and with each other's sense of humor. Moreover, the process is generative or circular, since this kind of humor constructs and contributes to the solidarity of a group. Collaboration among speakers constructs intimacy and thus a key function of conversational joking is the creation and maintenance of group solidarity among speakers.

Conversational joking in the hosts' interactions in Chinese TV and radio variety shows and talk shows offers us a unique opportunity to (1) study possible linguistic innovation of humor and gender of the time and (2) test the viability of media-based data as a surrogate to “real-world” data in sociolinguistic research. In these programs, teasing occurs at a high frequency and self-denigration is adopted by hosts as a strategy. Frequency of teasing and the strategy of self-directed joking reflect the typical layering of forms in language. Moreover, due to gender composition of hosts, the relationship between gender and humor is interesting to explore. In this respect, these findings support the claim that media language does reflect what is going on in languages and may even pave the way for innovation.

This paper examines variation in conversational joking through 24 transcripts of interactions among hosts and hostess in TV and Radio programs. It investigates whether there is much difference or similarity in hosts' and hostesses' humorous talks and if there are, what are they. Then in detailed analysis, this paper explains the results with functions of conversational joking in hosting language, and discusses the outcome of identity display and relational identity display through conversational joking. It also examines how conversational joking between hosts and hostesses eventually serves the construction of gender. In the end, according to results of the data, the present trend of women's humor in conversation is discussed.

Based on the data, the author finds that there are similarities as well as differences among hosts and hostesses concerning conversational joking (CJ). Teasing is a common occurrence in both speeches of hosts and hostesses. In general, hosts are more aggressive in their joking, and produce self-denigrating jokes more often than female presenters. Female presenters, in contrast with traditional submissive female models, are found to be witty and competitive in studio settings. However, as a rule, they are more cooperative than their male counterpart, and offer more laughter to align with their partner. In conversational joking, individual identity and relational identity among participants are established and confirmed. Through humor and other means, hosts constitute themselves as masculine men, while hostesses' humor both confirms conventional femininity and serves as a site of resistance to stereotypes of women.

**Key Words:** Gender; Conversational Joking; Teasing; Identity Display;  
Gender Construction



## 摘要

本文探讨的是性别和会话幽默之间的关系。文中回顾了幽默和性别相关研究，以幽默的一种类型——会话幽默为主要研究对象，从形式特点和功能特征对主持人语言中幽默行为进行分析，并对其显著特征进行着重讨论，肯定了嘲讽在会话中的积极意义，剖析了会话幽默中的个性展示和人际关系构建功能，进而讨论幽默过程中的性别构建问题。

会话幽默（又称情景幽默）是一柄双刃剑，它既能够引起冲突，同时又可以通过控制甚至避免对话中的摩擦和不愉快，这在很大程度上取决于会话话题、环境和对象。因此，对他人的嘲笑和自嘲很可能导致人际风险。假若对话双方相互并不熟悉，即使意在开玩笑的嘲讽也有可能被当作侮辱，而自我嘲讽也可能被理解为对自身不足的“供认不讳”。相反，假若对话者相互熟悉，人们就可以在其他发言者的会话幽默基础上延续幽默的情绪，有更多的发挥。因为这种幽默基于群体的团结性，所以这个过程通常是衍生或者循环的。谈话者之间的合作构建了亲密的关系，因此亲密朋友间的会话幽默最主要功能就是创造和维持群体的共聚性。

汉语广播电视中主持人的会话幽默为我们提供了一个特别的机会研究当代幽默与性别的关系，并检验在社会语言学的研究中用媒体语言代替现实语言作为研究数据的可行性。在这些节目中嘲讽出现的频率很高，男主持还运用了自我解嘲这一策略，这种幽默现象反映了一些形式在语言中的典型作用。而且节目中主持人“一男一女”的性别构成让探究幽默与性别的关系变得十分有趣。因此，我们有理由相信媒体语言在一定的情况下能够真实反映现实语言的态势，甚至可以为语言的创新发展奠定基础。

本文选择 24 期广播电视节目中男女主持的会话幽默进行分析，探讨其幽默语言是否具有共性和差异，具体又体现在哪些方面。在此数据分析基础上，文章阐述了主持人会话幽默的作用，并实现个性展示和人际关系构建的功能。此外，本文还探讨了主持人间发生的会话幽默如何实现性别的建构。最后根据数据结果描述了当今女性运用会话幽默的特点和趋势。

作者通过数据分析发现了男女主持人会话幽默的一些共性和差异。男女主持人都经常对人进行嘲讽。通常男性的玩笑更具有攻击性，也比女主持人更经常进行自我解嘲。与传统的温顺的女性形象相反的是，女主持人在节目中表现得机智幽默，很有竞争力。但她们一般都比男主持人更有合作精神，通过笑声来达到配合的目的。通过会话幽默，男性和女性的个人身份和人际关系得到了显示和强化。男主持在幽默过程中构建了男子气概，而女主持的幽默话语既是对传统女性气质的肯定，同时也是对女性刻板印象的一种驳斥。

**关键词：**性别；会话幽默；嘲讽；个性展示；性别构建

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## Introduction

### Orientation of research

For decades, the relationship between gender and language has been investigated from different perspectives. Theorists and researchers in 1970s initiated the study to explain the speaking difference in men and women. In these researches, women are described as a group lack sense of humor. Researches imply that women speak in particular ways because they are women. As these conclusions are by and large derived from observation, they have later been criticized for its lack of empirical data, and for a reliance on their own intuition. Nevertheless, their work sparks a flurry of action in language and gender study and provides a valuable impetus and focus for further research.

In recent years, partly because of problems in establishing valid and reliable gender differences in language and speech style, and partly influenced by the growing interest in discourse within the social sciences generally, research on gender and language has expanded. Thus, both gender and language are in the process of being redefined. Humor, as a mode of discourse and a strategy for social interaction, plays an important role in gendered communication. With analysis of same-gender and cross-gender conversations in both laboratory and spontaneous settings, modern sociolinguistic studies have illuminated mechanisms, styles and the functions of humor. All these findings and research have to some extent enriched the gender study.

However, most of the researches on gender and humor are dealt with speaking behavior in much of western societies, and hardly touch on the Chinese performance in humorous interactions. Even when they do, the results turn out to be frustrating. According to a recent research conducted by Yue (2006), humor is ranked among the *least* important factors in relation to the ideal Chinese personality among the undergraduate students from Inner Mongolia Normal University. Besides, according to the creativity research carried out by Rudowicz & Yue (2002), it is found that “humor” is missing in the Chinese perception of creativity. Yue points out that ‘Humor’, consistently attributed to a creative person, is *not* indicative of creativity in the minds of Chinese. Their conclusion is that Chinese people seems not to be so humorous, to

which they consider both creativity and humor as not so important. Their assertions, based entirely on surveys assigned to dozens of college undergraduates in Inner Mongolia University and neglecting such important factors as race/ethnicity, social class, and gender in their study, are not a representative or diverse group of Chinese. The observation of the author is in great contrast with theirs. To my knowledge, the interaction among Chinese is also fraught with humor and laughter. To investigate this issue, the author initiates this research. As humor can be discussed from different perspectives, the study is further narrowed down to the relationship between gender and humor production. This study concentrates on media language, and explores the traits of the hosts' and hostesses' humor in TV and broadcasting programs.

Most of previous research on gender and humor are carried out in laboratory setting, in which questionnaires are designed to validate the hypothesis. Only recently has research targeted humor that occurs in spontaneous conversation. Unfortunately many studies concentrate on conversational joking in sitcoms, which are challenged for lacking reliabilities, though easier to collect data. The inherent vice of sitcoms lies in the fact that jokes are set by playwrights, rather than responses to problems in real world. As the interactions among participants in the programs are done in a prompt way, their exchanges will be quite similar to spontaneous and natural dialogues in daily life. In this regard, the study of hosts' performance in TV and broadcasting program will to a large extent illuminate how gender identity is constructed through humor. Apart from the pervasiveness of the media as a form of mass communication, there are good reasons, from a critical linguistic perspective, why the analysis of media language is a worthy enterprise. As discussed by Fairlough (1995):

First, the media have signifying power, that is, the power to represent things in particular ways – largely (but not only) a matter of language use.

Second, the media are not simply representational, but can be seen as sites for the discursive construction, and contestation, of knowledge, beliefs, values, social relations, and social identities.

Moreover, media discourse works ideologically: the meanings produced serve a system of power relations, and all representation involves decisions about what to include and what to exclude, what to foreground and what to background.

Finally, media discourse assumes/creates subject positions for an ideal viewer or



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