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## Cognitive Models of Humor in Anecdotal Discourse: Based on the Chinese Language

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**Abstract.** This study examines the cognitive models underlying humor in Chinese anecdotal discourse through a systematic frame analysis of linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic frameworks. This paper aims to demonstrate that while humor research has traditionally focused on Western models, this paper argues that Chinese anecdotal humor operates through distinct cognitive directions shaped by the language's tonal properties, high-context cultural norms, and historical-literary traditions. A quantitative analysis reveals that linguistic ambiguity accounts for approximately 60% of humorous devices in our corpus, while conceptual opposition and cultural schema dependency comprise 25% and 15% respectively. Notably, these models frequently overlap, as seen in riddles combining homophonic wordplay with classical allusions. This research contributes to cross-cultural humor studies by demonstrating how language typology and cultural memory systems shape fundamental humor perception.

**Keywords:** cognitive linguistics, frame, humor

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## Когнитивные модели юмора в анекдотическом дискурсе на материале китайского языка

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**Аннотация.** Рассматриваются когнитивные модели, лежащие в основе формирования комического эффекта в анекдотическом дискурсе китайского языка. Посредством фреймового анализа лингвистических, культурных и прагматических рамок анализируются глубинные когнитивные модели, заложенные в китайском анекдотическом жанре. Цель исследования — показать, что китайский анекдотический юмор функционирует посредством различных когнитивных схем, сформированных тональными свойствами языка, культурными нормами с высоким контекстом и историко-литературными традициями. Количественный анализ показывает, что лингвистическая двусмысленность составляет примерно 60 % юмористических приемов в проанализированном материале, в то время как концептуальная фреймовая оппозиция и прецедентные модели (основанные на культурном и историческом контексте) составляют 25 и 15 % соответственно. Примечательно, что данные модели конвергентны и формируют сложную иерархическую когнитивную структуру китайского анекдота. Результаты исследования вносят вклад в изучение китайского юмора, демонстрируя, каким образом формируются фундаментальное восприятие юмора у носителей китайского языка.

**Ключевые слова:** когнитивная лингвистика, фрейм, когнитивная модель

**Финансирование:** публикация выполнена при поддержке Программы стратегического академического лидерства РУДН.

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### Introduction

Humour is an indispensable part of human life and at the same time humour is a multi-disciplinary field of research. Due to its multilayered and complex nature, the phenomenon has attracted significant attention from scientists working in such fields as psychology, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, and literature. With the rise of a cognitive approach in linguistics, humour has also been investigated through that lens. The benefits of a newly discovered influential cognitive approach can be capitalized on with its potential to shed light on the mechanism of humour and what essentially makes people laugh.

On the one hand, humor is culturally bounded, on the other hand, it is international. Comic perception is determined by the national mental makeup of the character, as well as the comedic possibilities of a particular language. This study

addresses the issues of generating Chinese humor. Following N.V. Novospasskaya et al., we consider that “in this regard, it seems interesting to compare those signs and the meanings they express that coincide within the Chinese and Russian linguistic cultures, determined by universal human values, the foundations of traditional society and the biological nature of family relationships” [1. P. 635]. As N.A. Speshnev notes, “in China, humor was decisively influenced by ancient mythological and ethical traditions that sanctified rigid collectivism, the inseparability of the individual from society, the priority of mass actions and mutual assistance” [2. P. 199]. The authority of collectivism is reinforced by Confucianism, which upholds conservative traditions. In a society in which there is strict subordination, laughing at parents, superiors, the state, the government, the emperor was forbidden. Most Chinese jokes and anecdotes are nothing more than edifying stories, the humor of which is obscure or completely incomprehensible to a European [3. P. 308–312]. In Chinese perception and comic creation, the main thing is to “surpass yourself” and see the funny, negative and unfair in people’s lives [2. P. 200].

Humour may be present in oral communication (as part of face-saving tactics or a means of entertaining or discouraging the interlocutor(s)), and it may occur in any form of writing. In fiction it may form special genres, for example anecdote. In the explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language edited by S.I. Ozhegov, ‘anecdote’ is defined as: «очень маленький рассказ с забавным, смешным содержанием и неожиданным острым концом» (a very short story with funny, amusing content and an unexpected sharp ending)<sup>1</sup>.

The cultural specificity of Chinese humor is reflected and in the traditional terminology that is used in various cases to refer to the funny. In Chinese, numerous terms related to the concept of comic require some clarification. A large number of them need to be classified and clarified. Russian terminology of humor does not have direct equivalents some of them, and some of them only partially equal. To illustrate this point, N.A. Speshnev cites numerous Chinese terms related to the concept of “comic” and their translation into Russian: 即光 ‘импровизация’ (improvisation), 幽默 ‘юмор’ (humor), 诙谐 ‘шутка, острота’ (joke, a witty remark), 讽刺 ‘сатира’ (satire), 滑稽 ‘комический, уморительный; смехота, буфф, комик’ (comic, hilarious, laughter, buff, comedian), 嘲讽 ‘ирония’(ridicule), 反语 ‘ирония’ (irony), 笑话 ‘шутка, анекдот’ (joke, anecdote), 戏谑 ‘шутка’ (joke), 模 ‘пародия’ (parody), 冷嘲 ‘сарказм’ (sarcasm), 嘲笑 ‘насмешка’ (mockery), 嘲弄 ‘насмешка’(mockery), 打诨 ‘балагурство’ (buffoonery), 油滑 ‘лукавство, хитрость’ (cunning), 机智 ‘находчивость, смекалка’ (quick-witted, ingenuity), 俏皮话 ‘шутка’ (joke), 双关俏皮话 ‘каламбур’ (equivoque) [2. P. 204–205].

<sup>1</sup> Ozhegov, S.I. (2009). *Explanatory dictionary of the Russian language: about 100,000 words, terms and phraseological expressions*, L. I. Skvortsova (Ed.). Moscow : Onyx. P. 27.

It should be noted that the analysis and research of these areas of Chinese humor from the point of view of cognitive linguistics are a separate field that serves as a perspective for further research.

The following study **aims at** to analyze cognitive models of humor that create a humorous effect in 笑话 xiaohua Chinese anecdotal expressions in order to identify the ability of native Chinese speakers to create and perceive the comic. In our opinion, the results of the research will help clarify the linguistic techniques for expressing cultural context in Chinese humor. Similar studies about Russian culture have been conducted previously using Japanese, English and Finnish languages [4. P. 44–45].

In Chinese lexicographic source 现代汉语词典 the term ‘笑话’ refers to: “能引人发笑的谈话或故事；供人当作笑料的事情” (A conversation or story that can make people laugh; something that can be used as a joke)<sup>2</sup>.

### Theoretical framework: Theories of Humour

Humor is a complex psychological and social phenomenon that has been studied across disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and neuroscience. In the standard literature on the theories of humour, three basic theories can be outlined [5. P. 3]:

- Superiority Theory
- Relief Theory
- Incongruity Theory
- Social Bonding Theory
- Cognitive-Developmental Theories

The **Superiority Theory** points out that people laugh at the misfortunes of others, and the action reflects their superiority. The theory has been developed in the works of Plato (*Philebus*), Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes (*Leviathan*), Henri Bergson (*Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*) and many others. Plato believes [5. P. 3] that humour is in its essence some form of malice towards people who are seen as, relatively speaking, powerless. Hobbes puts forward [5. P. 3] the idea that humans constantly compete with each other, looking, therefore, for each other’s shortcomings. Laughter in this sense indicates the sudden realization of someone’s superiority: it is an expression of the so-called “sudden glory” [5. P. 3]. Charles Gruner reformulated [5. P. 3] the theory as the Superiority Theory of Humour. His conception comprises a three-part thesis:

- In every humorous situation there is a winner and a loser.
- A humorous situation is always marked by incongruity.
- For a situation to be humorous, there has to be an element of surprise.

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<sup>2</sup> 现代汉语词典. 第7版. 北京: 中国社会科学院语言研究所词典编辑室编商务印书馆, 2016. 1800 页. Modern Chinese Dictionary. 7th edition. Beijing: Dictionary Editing Office, Institute of Linguistics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Commercial Press, 2016. P. 879.

As we see from the above presented information, the Superiority Theory is psychological verging on a philosophic approach to the problem. The theory strives to bring in the communicative aspects of the phenomenon, thus highlighting the motives of humour rather than its linguistic side. However, for further linguistic consideration it is important to mention that the statement about “an element of surprise” one needs to make a situation to be humorous is relevant in modeling humour linguistically.

The **Relief Theory** is of a physiological or psycho-physiological nature. Sigmund Freud’s theory of how laughter can release tension and psychic energy significantly influenced the development of the Relief Theory. According to this theory, the energy continuously builds up within the human body until it is of no use and thus has to be released. The Relief Theory has led many to believe that laughter is beneficial for health.

The **Incongruity Theory** is the one of the most influential approach to the study of humour and laughter. The proponents of this theory are the following: Immanuel Kant (*Critique of Judgment*), Arthur Schopenhauer (*The World as Will and Representation*). Kant [5. P. 4] was the first to make full conceptualization of incongruity. The main idea of the theory is well expressed in the following words said by Schopenhauer [5. P. 4]: “The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and the laugh itself is just an expression of this incongruity.” Many scholars, however, note that what makes a situation funny is not the incongruity itself but the congruous resolution of the apparent incongruity. For this reason, the theory is sometimes called the incongruity-resolution theory. The incongruity-resolution is a linguistic theory, as it provides an explanation of how jokes are structured.

The **Social Bonding Theory** was developed by R.I.M. Dunbar [6] and points out that humor strengthens group cohesion and communication. It is based on the idea that laughter signals trust and shared understanding within groups (for example, inside jokes among friends).

The **Cognitive-Developmental Theories** based on the concept that humor requires mental ability to detect and resolve incongruities. Thomas Veatch’s “A Theory of Humor” [7] proposes a cognitive-perceptual model explaining why humans find certain things funny. His theory builds on incongruity but adds a crucial emotional component.

Studying child humor development, Piaget [8] found out that children’s humor evolves with cognitive growth and a child’s joke reflects their current mental stage. For example, symbolic thinking at the age of 2–7 years old can be reflected on the language level by using silly sounds or mislabeling (e.g., *You’re a banana!*). At the age of 7–11 cognitive focus is based on logical thinking about concrete ideas (e.g., Why did the scarecrow win an award? Because he was outstanding in his field!). This example shows pun on literal vs. figurative meaning. At the age

of 12+ teenager focuses on abstract thinking, satire, and sarcasm (e.g., “*Wow, you’re so fast!*” to a slowpoke).

Thus, the author comes to the conclusion that humor mirrors cognitive skills as he observed the progression from concrete to abstract (Early humor is physical → later humor is linguistic/social). The role of schemas is also crucial as kids laugh when new info clashes with existing knowledge. Therefore, it is no wonder why the average adult would not find a knock-knock joke funny or amusing. Kolb cites Tamashiro to say that the types of humour that children enjoy are related to their developing personality [9. P. 4]. One can go as far as to propose the idea that virtually anything can be amusing to anyone under the right circumstances. There is therefore no point in trying to measure what makes us laugh, as it depends on the circumstances, as some scholars say [9. P. 5]. This is why they suggest that those studying this phenomenon should shift their focus from that which people perceive as humorous to the circumstances in which humour is actualized.

Humour may be considered to be a genre-creating phenomenon. Comedy is a genre that is closely associated with humour. As King points out [10. P. 5], comedy involves departures from what is considered to be the normal routines of life of the social group in question.

The simultaneous presence of the two frames of reference — absurd and plausible/logical — is what creates the comic effect. This phenomenon is termed ‘bisociation’ which is elaborated on by Arthur Koestler. He points out that comedy results from “the perception of a situation or an idea in two mutually incompatible associative contexts” [10. P. 15]. Koestler says that “it is the sudden clash between these two mutually exclusive codes or rules — or associative contexts — which produces the comic effect. It compels us to perceive the situation in two self-consistent but incompatible frames of reference at the same time; it makes us function simultaneously on two different wave-lengths” [10. P. 15].

Humour can be viewed as a socio-psychological phenomenon which is connected with individual behaviour and communication activities. Humour is linked with culture: each nation possesses methods of humour and discipline that are unique to it. They are rooted in the principles and etiquette of this culture which are shared by those belonging to it. By way of example, we can mention the difference between the British who usually make fun of their work and dignity and the French who do not like to laugh at themselves.

The theory of Chinese humor in world science has been studied by various scientists from different points of view: from linguistic and cultural perspectives: The Chinese Humor Scale: Development and Validation [11], verbs of laughter [12]. Cultural and cognitive differences in Chinese humor appreciation were studied by Jiang & others [12]. Anthropological and historical views touch upon the problem of traditional humor in Chinese medieval art [14], Satire and humor in Ancient China [15], the comic genre of *xiangsheng* [18].

## Theoretical framework: Linguistic Approach to Humour

The linguistic approach to humour examines how language structures, semantics, pragmatics, and discourse create and convey humour. This framework is essential for analyzing jokes, puns, and other forms of verbal humour, particularly in culturally rich contexts like Chinese humour. Humour can either maintain or threaten social ‘face’ [19] which is vital for Chinese culture where the concept of 面子 *mianzi* plays the crucial role in social life (see more details in: [20. P. 16–18]).

Taking a linguistic approach to the study of humour, one can say that the humorous or comic effect can be the result of linguistic creativity. For example, I. V. Zykova [19–21] has been researching linguistic creativity and the realization of the comic in cinematic discourse. It is generally acknowledged that the word has special significance in the realization of the comic, and therefore a distinctive feature of any film comedy is the initially high status of the verbal component, as the founders of film theory stated [19. P. 105]. This happens because comedy in general is a semantic phenomenon, which is therefore closely connected with the word. Based on the concept of Zykova’s linguistic creativity, Brown & Levinson’s concept and Semantic Script Theory of Humour by V. Raskin [21], we believe that these ideas can be applied on Chinese language. In Chinese cultural context self-deprecating humour (or in Chinese 自嘲 *zichao*) preserves others’ face. Let us look at satire in 相声 *xiangsheng* which often targets societal issues indirectly. For example, in Chinese there is the idiomatic expression (or in Chinese 惯用语 *guanyongyu*) 马大哈 *Madaha* (about a careless office worker nicknamed *Madaha*), which originated from a classic *xiangsheng* performance 买猴儿 *Buying Monkeys* in the 1950-s of the 20th century. In Chinese humor often serves as a social instrument, preserving harmony by avoiding direct confrontation as humor targets the self to avoid conflict. Moreover, researching the features of Chinese anecdotal discourse, it is necessary to take into account the features of the grammatical structure of the Chinese language: “It is known that the Chinese language differs from the Russian language in a number of grammatical features at the level of morphology and at the level of syntax. The Chinese language is characterized by the economy of grammatical means, which is manifested in various aspects of the grammatical structure of the Chinese language” [22. P. 504].

## Methodology: Frame Structuring as a Method of Investigation

The study uses the **method** of frame-constructive analysis, conceptual analysis, modeling method, and the analysis of definitions of the elements of the context in the best known and authoritative Chinese dictionaries<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> 汉字形义分析字典. 北京：北京大学出版社，1999. 736 页. A Dictionary of Chinese Character: Form and Meaning. Beijing：Beijing University Press, 1999; 新华多功能字典. 北京：商务印书馆辞书研究中心编，2008. 1331 页. Xinhua Multifunctional Dictionary. Beijing：Dictionary Research

Frame semantics are usually viewed as the cornerstone of cognitive linguistics theory, and are rarely considered from the point of their methodological value predominantly related to text or discourse analysis [23. P. 2]. *Frames* provide the sort of information necessary for the understanding of a particular event or scenario. According to M. Minsky [24], a frame can be viewed as a network of nodes and relations. The top levels of a frame contain fixed elements that represent the information that is always true about a particular situation. The lower levels have *terminals*, or *slots*, that are filled by specific instances. There can be some conditions specified by terminals that have to be met by their *assignments*.

The system of categories introduced by some frame is structured according to some motivating context. The motivating context is, as Ch. J. Fillmore [25. P. 119] states, “some body of understandings, some pattern of practices, or some history of social institutions, against which we find intelligible the creation of a particular category in the history of the language community”. For instance, the word *weekend* means what it means both because of the calendric seven-day cycle and because of a practice of devoting a larger block of days within the cycle to public work and two consecutive days to one’s private life.

A frame, as Ye. Beliaevskaya writes, is a mental or cognitive structure that reflects the knowledge a given society has about a certain fragment of reality. A frame is a multi-layered structure — it does not only include all the linguistic means that are needed for the transmission of the information about a fragment of reality, but also a schematized representation of the fragment in the general system of human knowledge about the world [26. P. 14].

Frame-based methodology of research can be applied both in studying written and oral discourse but usually when linguists refer to ‘studying speech’ they refer to analyzing written texts. In our research we deal with cinema discourse. i. e. with oral communication. So far, the frame semantics methodology of linguistic study was mainly applied to written discourse but it is also applicable to studying different linguistic phenomena in oral speech.

### Research material

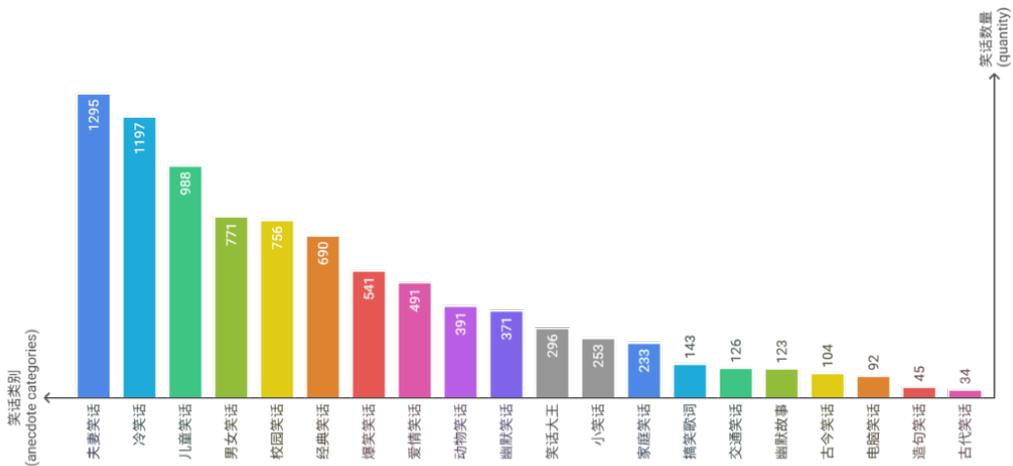
The research material was anecdotes selected from the electronic resource <https://www.jokedw.com> in the Chinese segment of the Internet. In total, this source contains 8940 Chinese anecdotal expressions. Note that anecdotal statements are divided into 20 categories. For clarity, we have distributed these categories on a descending scale, from containing the largest number of jokes to the least:

1) 夫妻笑话 *jokes about a married couple* — 1,295 units; 2) 冷笑话 *dry, ‘cold’ jokes* — 1197 units; 3) 儿童笑话 *children’s jokes* — 988 units;

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Center of Commercial Press, 2008; 新华大字典. 北京 : 商务印书馆国际有限公司, 2015. 1352页. Xinhua Big Dictionary of Characters. Beijing : The Commercial Press International Ltd., 2015.

4) 男女笑话 *jokes about men and women* — 771 units; 5) 校园笑话 *school/student jokes* — 756 units; 6) 经典笑话 *classic jokes* — 690 units; 7) 爆笑笑话 *very funny jokes* — 541 units; 8) 爱情笑话 *jokes about love* — 491 units; 9) 动物笑话 *jokes about animals* — 391 units 10) 幽默笑话 *humorous jokes* — 371 units; 11) 笑话大王 *king of jokes* — 296 units; 12) 小笑话 *short jokes* — 253 units; 13) 家庭笑话 *family jokes* — 233 units; 14) 搞笑歌词 *funny lyrics* — 143 units; 15) 交通笑话 *jokes about transport* — 126 units; 16) 幽默故事 *humorous stories* — 123 units; 17) 古今笑话 *anecdotes from antiquity to the present* — 104 units; 18) 电脑笑话 *computer jokes* — 92 units; 19) 造句笑话 *sentence-making jokes* — 45 units; 20) 古代笑话 *ancient jokes* — 34 units. Based on this classification, the following graph was drawn up (Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Anecdote categories in Chinese and its proportion**

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

Let's analyze the statistical data of the above graph. There are 20 categories in total with the number of jokes ranging from 34 to 1295 units. The largest number of anecdotes are concentrated in categories related to everyday life and interpersonal relationships: marital (1295), 'cold' jokes (1197), children's anecdotes (988). The least number of jokes relate to highly specialized or historical topics: jokes based on example sentences (45), ancient jokes (34).

As can be seen from the graph, the Chinese linguistic culture is dominated by the topic of **married life**, which indicates the popularity of family relations and humor related to marriage and family lifestyle. Special attention should be paid to such categories as cold jokes (1197). This type of humor is highly popular, characterized by unexpected or witty responses, often with ambiguity. A large number of jokes for children (988) speaks about the demand for family and educational humor.

Topics of **interpersonal relations** and society demonstrate an average frequency: jokes about men and women (771), school/student jokes (756), family jokes (233), jokes about love (491). These categories reflect the importance of social roles, relationships, and life situations in Chinese humor.

The following topic of jokes can be characterized as “**classics of the genre**”. It combines popular, time-tested and funniest jokes, which testifies to the rich tradition of Chinese humor: classic jokes (690), very funny jokes (541), humorous jokes (371), king of jokes (296).

The **thematic classification** of Chinese jokes includes topics such as: jokes about animals (391), funny lyrics (143), jokes about transport (126), computer jokes (92). These subtopics feature a variety of humorous content, including modern realities and everyday situations.

In addition to the thematic classification, Chinese jokes can be categorized in terms of the **diachronic aspect**, as well as based on the **linguistic characteristics**: jokes from antiquity to the present (104), ancient jokes (34), sentence-making jokes (45), short jokes (253) humorous stories (123).

The above categories demonstrate an interest in the historical and linguistic aspects of humor. Short and concise forms of humor are in demand for quick entertainment. Social and family themes occupy a leading position, reflecting the value of relationships and everyday situations in Chinese humor culture. The variety of topics — from classical and ancient jokes to modern (computer, transport) — testifies to the dynamic development of the humorous genre.

In this study, the most frequent category of 夫妻笑话 jokes about a married couple (1,295), reflecting the realities of modern Chinese society, was chosen as the most illustrative material. The study of the remaining categories is also of interest as a prospect for further research for linguists, cognitive scientists, as well as anyone interested in Chinese linguaculture.

## **Results: cognitive models of humour found in the material**

### **1. Phonological and lexical ambiguity: the “Polysemy” model**

The most common in our material under investigation are cognitive models involving play on words based on homonymy and polysemy. By tradition linguists usually speak about polysemy and homonymy in the context of the problem of “semantic ambiguity”. Ambiguity as a semantic phenomenon was discussed in works by Stephen Ullmann [27], Geoffrey Leech [28], Croft & Cruise [29], and Vyvyan Evans [30]. In the material of our research, we have found a whole host of examples of polysemy and homonymy resulting in semantic ambiguity. Let us consider one of them. The following anecdote is the example of polysemy resulting in semantic ambiguity (Table 1).

This example demonstrates the use of linguistic wordplay based on polysemy. The lexical ambiguity is realized by the double meaning of the lexeme 光光的 *smooth, bald*, figuratively means *lack of jewelry* and literally means *lack of hair*.

The basis for the humorous effect is that the frame ROMANTIC INTENTION (“*Want to buy a necklace*”) is mapped onto SHAVING CONTEXT, forming husband’s interpretation (“*We’re talking about hair*”) (Figure 2).

Table 1. The polysemy resulting in semantic ambiguity

<p>《脖子没长毛》 丈夫正在刮胡子，妻子想让丈夫给她买条项链，便在他身后絮絮叨叨道：“亲爱的，你看我的脖子上光光的，什么也没有。”丈夫有点莫名其妙地摸了摸自己的脖子，说：“可我的脖子也没长毛啊。”</p>	<p>“No Hair on the Neck” While the husband was shaving, his wife wanted him to buy her a necklace. She started hinting by complaining behind him: “Honey, look at my neck—it’s so bare, there’s <b>nothing on it at all.</b>” Confused, the husband touched his own neck and replied: “Well, my neck <b>doesn’t have any hair either.</b>”</p>
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Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

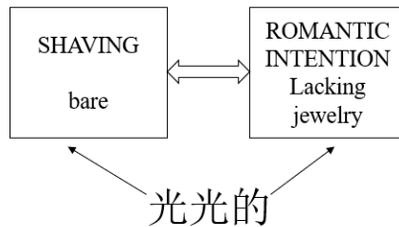


Figure 2. Cognitive model of the anecdote “No Hair on the Neck”

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina

## 2. Phonological and lexical ambiguity: the “Homonymy” model

The following anecdote is a perfect example of Chinese homophone—based humor 谐音梗 *xieyin geng*, where puns on identical or similar pronunciations create comedy while reflecting cultural taboos (Table 2).

Table 2. Anecdote based on cultural taboos

<p>《一梨不分》 古时候，有一对恩爱夫妻。一天，丈夫买了一个大梨回家，想和妻子分着吃。妻子连忙摆手说：“不行不行！‘分梨’就是‘分离’，咱俩可不能分开！” 丈夫笑道：“那就不分了，我整个吃了吧！” 妻子又急了：“更不行！‘吃梨’（吃离）不吉利！”</p>	<p>“Never Split a Pear” In ancient times, there was a loving couple. One day, the husband brought home a large pear and wanted to share it with his wife. The wife immediately waved her hands and said: “No, no! ‘Splitting a pear’ (分梨 fēnlí) sounds like ‘separating’ (分离 fēnlí)—we must never part!” The husband laughed and said: “Alright, then I’ll eat the whole pear myself!” The wife grew even more anxious: “Absolutely not! ‘Eating a pear’ (吃梨 chīlí) sounds like ‘consuming separation’ (吃离 chīlí)—that’s bad luck!”</p>
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End of Table 2

<p>丈夫想了想，说：“那这样，我们‘合吃’一个梨，就是‘和和气气永不离’！” 妻子这才笑了，说：“好，那我们‘一起咬梨’，就是‘咬住缘分不分离’！”</p>	<p>The husband thought for a moment and suggested: “Then let’s ‘eat it together’ (合吃 héchī), which means ‘harmony and never parting’ (和和气气永不离 héhé qìqì yǒng bù lí)” Finally, the wife smiled and said: “Good! Then we’ll ‘bite’ the pear together—that means ‘holding onto our fate and never separating’ (咬住缘分不分离 yǎo zhù yuánfēn bù fēnlí)” (Note: In Chinese, pear [梨 lí] sounds identical to to separate [离 lí]. Thus, couples avoid splitting pears as it symbolizes separation)</p>
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Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

The comic effect realized here is based on homonymy — the phonological similarity of the two words. Chinese characters convey meaning visually, allowing homophone anecdotes with different glyphs. Simple homophones create layered meaning:

- 分梨 (fēnlí) vs. 分离 (fēnlí) — *splitting a pear* sounds like *separating*.
- 吃梨 (chīlí) vs. 吃离 (chīlí) — *eating a pear* sounds like *consuming separation*.
- 合吃梨 (héchīlí) vs. 和气不离 (héqìbùlí) — *eating together* implies *harmony without parting*.
- 咬梨 (yǎolí) vs. 咬住缘分 (yǎozhùyuánfèn) — *biting the pear* puns on *holding onto fate*.

This story plays on Chinese superstitions about homophones, where words with unlucky meanings (e.g. *separation*) are avoided, especially between couples. The wife’s panic reflects folk beliefs that language can influence reality (*sympathetic magic*). This homophonic pun relies on Chinese character structure, phonetics (change in tone that entails a change in meaning), and cultural semantics. Below is a breakdown of how the characters create humor despite identical pronunciation. Thus, the anecdote weaponizes Chinese’s logographic nature and cultural psyche to turn a pear into a marital landmine. We can compare this pun with English phrases *never split a pear* and *never split a pair*. The actualization of two incompatible frames results in the stylistic device of pun (Figure 3).

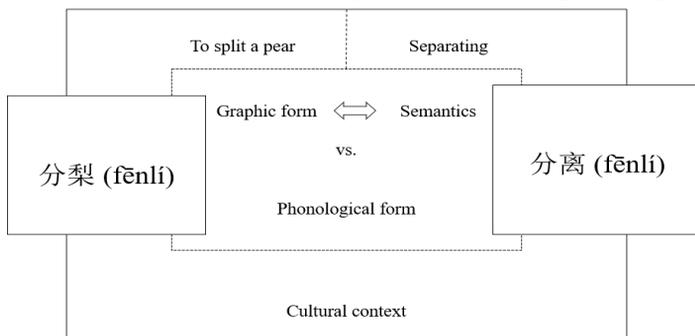


Figure 3. Cognitive model of the anecdote “Never Split a Pear”

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

### 3. The “Paradox” model

The anecdote below follows the paradoxical humor model, where the punchline subverts expectations by presenting a logically contradictory yet unexpectedly valid perspective. Below is a breakdown of its linguistic, cognitive, and cultural mechanisms (Table 3).

Table 3. The paradoxical humor model

<p>《结婚的原因》                  妻：“我晓得，你与我结婚，是因为我有钱。”                  夫：“不是，是因为我没有钱”。</p>	<p>“The reason for marriage”                  Wife: “I know, you married me because I have money.                  Husband: “No, it’s because I don’t have money”</p>
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Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina

This anecdote contains logical twist: the wife expects the following *answer*: “No, I married you for love!” (denying greed). Instead, the husband confirms her suspicion but reframes it — he married her because he was poor, not because she was rich. This creates a self-deprecating yet honest paradox. Minimalist structure also contributes to the humorous effect. The joke uses only two lines, making the paradox sharp and immediate. Analyzing cultural background, in China, rising material expectations in marriage (e.g., *bride price, home ownership*) make this joke particularly resonant. The husband’s reply reflects a cynical yet pragmatic view of relationships (Figure 4).

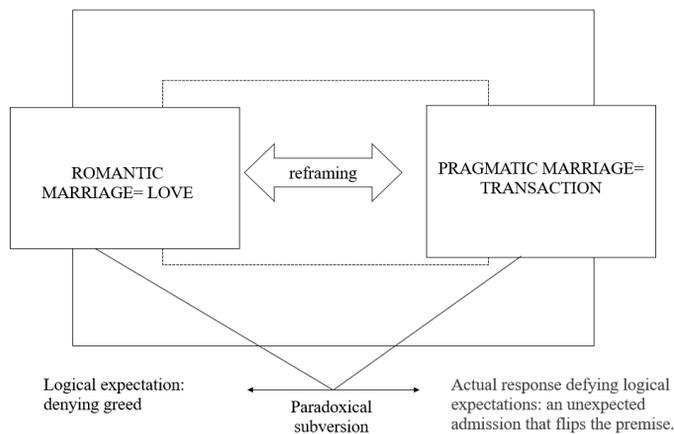


Figure 4. Cognitive model of the anecdote “The reason for marriage”

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina

### 4. Repetition with Variation (Lexical Symmetry) model:

The anecdote above follows the lexical symmetry + misdirection structure, where repetition sets a predictable pattern and variation subverts it for surprise (Table 4).

Table 4. Anecdote with the repetitive parallel syntactic structure and lexical symmetry

《能不能自己拿》	“Can’t You Just Take It Yourself?”
老公：“媳妇儿，用下你的洗发水。”	Husband: “Honey, can I use your shampoo?”
老婆：“自己拿。”	Wife: “Take it yourself.”
老公：“媳妇儿，用下你的护发素。”	Husband: “Honey, can I use your conditioner?”
老婆：“自己拿。”	Wife: “Take it yourself.”
老公：“媳妇儿，用下你的电吹风。”	Husband: “Honey, can I use your hair dryer?”
老婆：“自己拿。”	Wife: “Take it yourself.”
老公：“媳妇儿……”	Husband: “Honey—
老婆：“别烦我了，能不能自己拿！！！”	Wife (exasperated): “Stop bothering me! Can’t you just take it yourself?!”
于是老公就从老婆的钱包里拿了500块，走了。	So... the husband took 500 yuan from her wallet and left

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina

The repetitive parallel syntactic structure and lexical symmetry (媳妇儿，用下你的X/自己拿) build cognitive rhythmic predictability for the audience, making the deviation in the final line more jarring and thus funnier. The setup creates an expectation of a domestic scenario where the husband keeps asking to borrow bathroom items. The wife’s consistent 自己拿 *take it yourself* responses establish a pattern. The punchline subverts this expectation by suddenly shifting the *taking* to MONEY (a new semantic domain), violating the assumed BATHROOM frame. It is also interesting to note that the dynamic structure of the anecdote reflects chinese marital dynamics where wives often manage household items (and budgets!) (Figure 5).

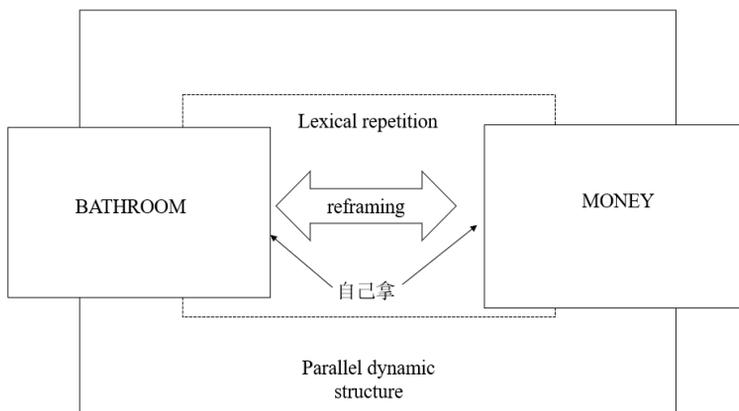


Figure 5. Cognitive model of the anecdote “Can’t You Just Take It Yourself?”

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

### 5. Parallel structure with frame opposition (mirroring with a twist)

The following anecdote is pragmatically ambiguous because contains parallel structure, using the floating phrase 你看看人家 *Look at how others are*. This phrase is context-dependent — its target shifts based on speaker’s intention (Table 5).

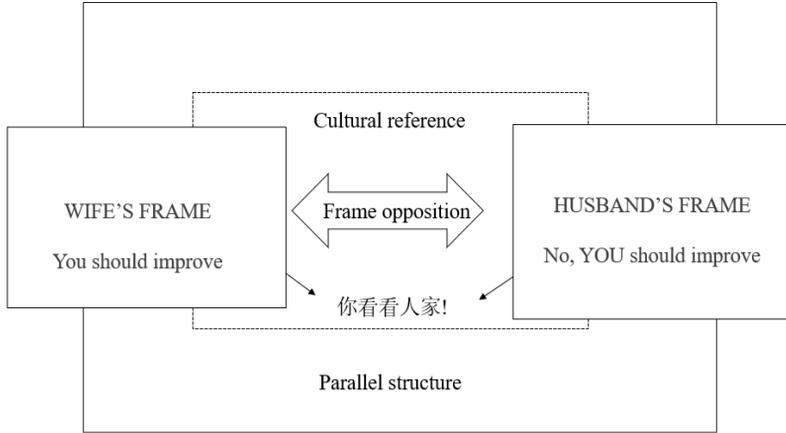
**Table 5. Anecdote with parallel structure with frame opposition**

<p>《跟老婆一起看节目》 跟老婆一起看节目，看到男嘉宾一下把女嘉宾抱起来。老婆：“你看看人家”我拿了张A4纸放在老婆肚子上，说：“你看看人家”……老婆现在还生着气呢。</p>	<p>“Look at how other couples are!” Husband and wife are watching a TV show where a male contestant effortlessly lifts the female contestant. Wife: “你看看人家!” (“Look at how other couples are!” implying “Why can’t you be like that?”). Husband places an A4 sheet of paper on her belly and says: “你看看人家!” (“Look at how other couples are!” implying “Why can’t you be like her [slim]?” Result: wife is still mad</p>
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Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

The humor arises from the husband’s deliberate misinterpretation, exploiting linguistic flexibility. The wife’s remark 你看看人家 implies *Why can’t you be like him?* (focusing on the man’s strength). The husband mirrors the exact phrase 你看看人家 but subverts the meaning — instead of comparing himself to the strong man, he compares his wife’s belly to the female contestant’s flat stomach. The parallel phrasing makes the twist funnier because it flips the criticism back at her.

Moreover, this anecdote demonstrates strategic complexity: by using minimal words but relies on shared cultural background knowledge (A4 waist meme). In China, holding up an A4 sheet (21cm wide) to one’s waist became a viral slimness challenge. We can also observe a nonverbal cue in the analyzed anecdote (placing paper on belly).



**Figure 6. Cognitive model of the anecdote “Look at how other couples are!”**

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina

### 6. The “Metaphorical Comparison” model

The metaphoric comparison in the context below uses the analogy of the Spring Festival Gala (春晚) to humorously critique the infrequency and perceived lack of warmth in the couple’s visits to the wife’s parents. Let us see a breakdown of the metaphor and its implications (Table 6).

Table 6. The “Metaphorical Comparison” model

<p>《春晚式探亲》                  过年陪媳妇回娘家 过年陪媳妇回娘家，                  老丈人酒过三巡，对我和媳妇说：“你们俩                  就像春晚一样，一年来一次，还没有把我                  逗开心！”</p>	<p>“Like the Spring Festival Gala”                  Visiting the wife’s family for Lunar New Year.                  After drinks, the father-in-law says:                  “You two are like the Spring Festival Gala—                  you show up once a year, and you still fail to                  entertain me!”</p>
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The Spring Festival Gala is a yearly televised event that families traditionally watch during Chinese New Year. By comparing the couple’s visits to CCTV’s Spring Festival Gala, the father-in-law implies their visits are just as infrequent—only once a year. The Gala is a highly staged show meant to entertain. The critique suggests the couple’s visits feel obligatory or superficial, lacking genuine emotional connection. The father-in-law’s remark blends sarcasm and cultural insight. While seemingly lighthearted (delivered after drinks), it underscores a common familial expectation in Chinese culture: that children should maintain frequent, meaningful contact with parents. The metaphor also hints at generational gaps.

Older generations may value traditional familial bonds more intensely, while younger couples might prioritize their immediate family or careers, leading to tension. Thus, the cultural context also plays the crucial role in understanding the humor. The joke subtly references the Confucian value of filial duty (孝道), implying the couple falls short of idealized norms. The Gala itself has faced criticism for being outdated or unrelatable to younger audiences. This mirrors how the father-in-law might feel about the couple’s visits — perfunctory and disconnected from his emotional needs. The metaphor critiques not just the frequency of visits but their quality, using a culturally salient reference to deliver a pointed yet playful rebuke. It reflects broader tensions between modern lifestyles and traditional familial expectations. This anecdote reflects a complex hierarchical cognitive structure consisting of metaphorical comparisons and a frame arrangement (Figure 7).

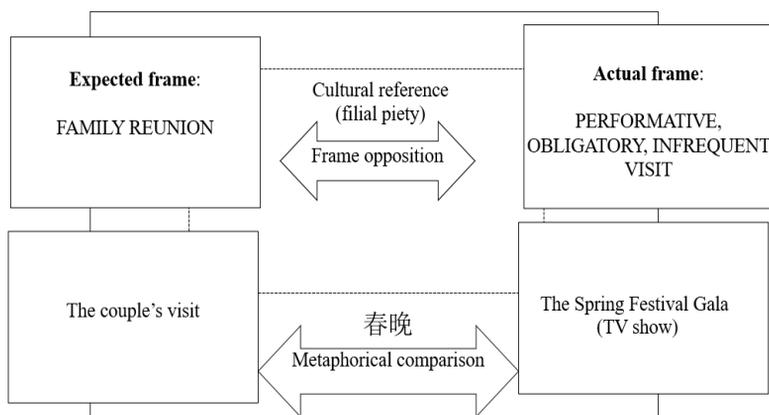


Figure 7. Cognitive model of the anecdote “Like the Spring Festival Gala”

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

## 7. The “Oxymoron” model

The oxymoron 矛盾修辞 *maodun xiuci* is a rhetorical device that combines contradictory or incongruous terms to create a paradoxical but often insightful or humorous effect. The anecdote about the “Cleverly Stupid Husband” (聪明的糊涂丈夫) is a perfect example of the “Oxymoron” model in Chinese humor, where contradictory terms are combined to create absurdity, satire, and philosophical playfulness.

The oxymoron’s linguistic effect is that it creates cognitive dissonance, forcing the listener to reconcile opposites. In Chinese, such constructions often follow **A而不B** or **A的B** patterns, where A and B are antonyms. In the analyzed anecdote, oxymorons function at multiple linguistic levels (Table 7).

Table 7. The “Oxymoron” model

《聪明的糊涂丈夫》	“The Cleverly Stupid Husband”
从前，有个书生，常说自己“大智若愚”（极聪明的人看起来愚笨）。一天，他妻子让他去买米。书生走到米店，老板问：“要多少？”他答：“买‘多而不多’之米！”老板愣住：“啥叫‘多而不多’？”书生解释：“就是‘够吃，但吃不饱’——若买太多，浪费；若买太少，挨饿。所以‘多而不多’正好！”老板哭笑不得，只好随便给他装了一袋。回家后，妻子打开米袋，发现只够煮两顿饭，怒道：“这叫‘多而不多’？根本是‘少而不少’！”书生摸着胡子点头：“夫人高见！‘少而不少’正是‘多而不多’的‘似是而非’之解！”妻子气得直跺脚：“你这人，真是明白的糊涂！”书生大笑：“彼此彼此！这叫‘糊涂的明白’，夫妻之道也！”	Once, there was a scholar who often claimed to be “great wisdom appearing as foll”. One day, his wife asked him to buy rice. When he arrived at the rice shop, the owner asked, “How much do you want?” The scholar replied, “I want ‘much but not much’ rice!” The shopkeeper was baffled: “What does ‘much but not much’ mean?” The scholar explained: “Enough to eat, but not enough to be full—if we buy too much, it’s wasteful; if too little, we’ll go hungry. So ‘much but not much’ is just right!” The shopkeeper, amused and exasperated, simply filled a random bag for him. When the scholar returned home, his wife opened the bag and found only enough rice for two meals. Furious, she scolded: “Is this ‘much but not much’?! It’s clearly ‘little but not little!’” The scholar stroked his beard and nodded: “Ah, my wife is truly insightful! ‘Little but not little’ is indeed the ‘seemingly so, yet not quite’ interpretation of ‘much but not much’!” His wife stamped her foot in frustration: “You—you’re ‘clearly stupid!’” The scholar laughed heartily: “Likewise, likewise! This is what we call ‘stupidly wise’—the very essence of marital harmony!”

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

Analyzing the lexical level, we have identified the examples, when two semantically opposing words are placed side by side: 1) 多而不多 *much but not much* — 多 *much* clashes with 不多 *not much*; 2) 少而不少 *little but not little* —

少 *little* contradicts 不少 *not little*; 3) 明白的糊涂 *clearly stupid* — 明白 *clear/wise* opposes 糊涂 *stupid*; 4) 糊涂的明白 *stupidly wise* — reverses the above for comedic effect.

On the semantic level the phrase as a whole conveys a logically impossible meaning, yet hints at an underlying truth. The husband’s 多而不多 is semantically absurd—how can rice be “much but not much”? The wife’s retort 少而不少 mirrors his absurdity, exposing its meaninglessness in practice. The final exchange (“明白的糊涂” vs. “糊涂的明白”) turns the contradiction into meta-humor about marital bickering. The humor derives from violating Grice’s Maxim of Quality (don’t say what you believe to be false) — the husband’s statements are intentionally nonsensical.

Pragmatic oxymoron is also productive in this anecdote. The utterance is self-defeating or ironic in context. The husband claims 大智若愚 *great wisdom seems like folly*, but his actions prove 大愚若智 *great folly pretends to be wisdom*.

The cultural background knowledge also contributes to the creating of comic effect. Husband’s attempt at Confucian moderation 中庸 *Doctrine of the Mean* backfires, as his “middle way” is just illogical. The joke mocks scholastic pedantry — a trope in Chinese humor (孔乙己 Kong Yiji), the pedantic scholar who overcomplicates everything), in this case we can also speak about precedent cognitive model in chinese humor (Figure 8).

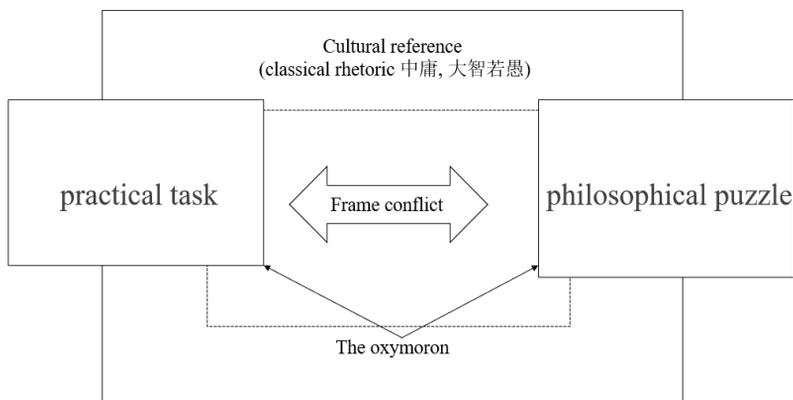


Figure 8. Cognitive model of the anecdote “The Cleverly Stupid Husband”  
 Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

### 8. The “precedent” (cultural and historical context) model

As analysis shows, one of the most productive models in Chinese anecdotal discourse is the model based on cultural and historical precedents. Its productivity stems from its ability to compress complex moral, historical, and philosophical ideas into vivid, actionable metaphors rooted in shared knowledge. The following anecdote is a vivid example of the precedent model of Chinese humor (Table 8).

Table 8. The “precedent” (cultural and historical context) model

<p>《借灯劝学》 清朝乾隆年间，江南有一对年轻夫妻。丈夫是个秀才，整日苦读却屡试不第，渐渐心灰意冷。妻子见状，便在元宵节当晚做了盏特别的花灯。 灯上画着：</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 一面是“鲤鱼跳龙门”的图案</li> <li>• 另一面却画着“鲤鱼困浅滩”</li> </ul> <p>丈夫不解其意，妻子笑道：“夫君看这灯：转过来是‘跃龙门’，转过去是‘困浅滩’。妾身每晚纺纱，也是转来转去——线要捻得紧，日子要熬得住。” 说着又指着灯谜：“『一轮明月照书房』——打一物。” 丈夫猜不出，妻子揭开谜底：“是油灯啊！明月虽好，不如灯下苦读实在。”</p>	<p>“Persuading Through a Lantern” During the Qianlong era of the Qing Dynasty, in Jiangnan, there lived a young couple. The husband, a scholar, studied diligently but repeatedly failed the imperial exams, growing increasingly disheartened. Noticing his despair, his wife crafted a special lantern for the Yuanxiao Festival (Lantern Festival). The lantern displayed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• On one side: “<b>A carp leaping over the Dragon Gate</b>” (symbolizing success in exams).</li> <li>• On the other: “<b>A carp stranded in shallow waters</b>” (symbolizing stagnation).</li> </ul> <p>Puzzled, the husband asked for an explanation. His wife smiled and said: “My dear, look at this lantern: turn it one way, and it’s ‘leaping the Dragon Gate’; turn it the other, and it’s ‘stuck in the shallows.’ When I spin thread at night, I too turn the wheel back and forth—the thread must be twisted tight, just as endurance is needed to weather life’s hardships.” She then pointed to a lantern riddle inscribed on it: “A full moon shines upon the study—guess what it is.” When her husband couldn’t answer, she revealed: “It’s an oil lamp! The moon may be beautiful, but it’s the lamp’s steady light that truly aids your studies.”</p>
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Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina

First of all, we should consider that this type of anecdote refers to historical anecdotes. This analysis examines the cultural shared knowledge required to fully comprehend the Qing Dynasty anecdote. By identifying key historical, symbolic, and sociolinguistic frameworks embedded in the narrative, we demonstrate how premodern Chinese didactic stories rely on culturally specific cognitive schemata for effective transmission of moral lessons. To fully grasp the depth of this Qing Dynasty anecdote, the reader must be familiar with several key elements of traditional Chinese cultural, historical, and social contexts:

Analyzing historical-contextual prerequisites we have identified several metaphors connected with Imperial examination system 科举制度 *keju zhidu*. It was the primary mechanism for bureaucratic recruitment in imperial China (605–1905 CE), emphasizing Confucian classics. A classic metaphor for passing imperial exams 鲤鱼跳龙门 *carp leaping the Dragon Gate*, derived from a legend where carp transform into dragons by overcoming a waterfall (the “Dragon Gate”) and directly maps onto exam success as transformative social mobility. This idiomatic expression represents social mobility in Confucian society. Another culturally dependent metaphor hidden in this anecdote is 鲤鱼困浅滩 *carp stranded in Shallow Waters*. A counter-symbol to the above, referencing the idiom

龙游浅水遭虾戏 *A dragon in shallow water is mocked by shrimp*, meaning talent stifled by circumstance.

To understand the humorous effect, the reader should recognize the cultural peculiarities of Chinese lifestyle. For example, Lantern Riddles (灯谜) is a Yuanxiao Festival tradition where riddles were written on lanterns to test wit. The wife’s riddle “*A full moon shines upon the study*” plays on the following: “Moonlight” as poetic but impractical vs. “oil lamp” as humble yet essential — a metaphor for persistent effort over idle dreams.

### Discussion

This study has systematically categorized the mechanisms of humor in traditional Chinese anecdotes, identifying key linguistic, cognitive, and cultural models that contribute to their comic and didactic effects. The analysis reveals that Chinese humor predominantly relies on high-context cultural knowledge, indirect communication, and linguistic complexity, distinguishing it from Western comedic traditions.

The study of language material enabled us to single out 8 cognitive models helping to create a humorous effect in the material under investigation. The revealed cognitive models of Chinese humor, which represent a complex hierarchical structure. The cognitive models based on situational frames converge with the cognitive models underlying stylistic devices and the cognitive models underlying the semantics of the language units forming unities. The models singled out supplement the previously discovered cognitive models producing a humorous effect — a peculiar kind of combining of different frames and a change in the profiling of the initial frame, and work alongside with them. The statistical results of this study can be presented in the form of the following diagram (Figure 9).



**Figure 9. Distribution of Humor Techniques in Chinese Anecdotes**

Source: compiled by Elizaveta A. Krasikova & Svetlana G. Korovina.

## Conclusions

In summary, Chinese anecdotal humor is a multilayered discourse where language, history, and social norms intersect. Its study offers not just insight into comedy, but into how culture shapes cognition—and why some jokes, like oil lamps, shine brightest for those who know how to tend them.

The conclusion that we consider basic for further investigation of humour in Chinese anecdotal discourse is that humour is produced by a convergence of cognitive models of humour and cognitive models underlying the use of language means and stylistic devices. Taking a linguistic approach to the study of humour, we have found out that the result of a comic effect is usually linguistic creativity which in Chinese is based on logographic writing system and phonological system with limited quantity of syllabemas. Chinese humor functions as a cultural schema, encoded knowledge that audiences must decode. Unlike Western “roast” comedy, it prioritizes subtlety, metaphor, and shared context over explicit punchlines.

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