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CULTURAL SPECIFICITY OF HUMOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UZBEK AND ENGLISH ANECDOTES

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Abstract

Humor is a universal phenomenon; however, its manifestation is deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic contexts. This paper explores the cultural specificity of humor through a comparative analysis of Uzbek and English anecdotes. The study aims to identify the cultural markers, social norms, and value systems reflected in humorous discourse. Drawing on theories of humor and pragmatics, particularly the works of Victor Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, the research examines how humor differs across cultures despite structural similarities. The findings reveal that Uzbek anecdotes tend to emphasize social hierarchy, morality, and collectivist values, while English anecdotes often focus on individuality, irony, and absurdity. The study contributes to cross-cultural linguistics and folkloristics by highlighting the role of humor as a cultural mirror.

Keywords: humor, anecdote, culture, Uzbek folklore, English humor, pragmatics

Introduction

Humor has long been an integral part of human communication and cultural expression. Anecdotes, as a genre of folklore, serve not only as a means of entertainment but also as a reflection of societal values and cultural norms. In different linguistic communities, humor functions in unique ways, shaped by historical, social, and cognitive factors.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how humor in Uzbek and English anecdotes reflects cultural specificity. While both traditions employ similar narrative structures, the underlying meanings and communicative intentions differ significantly. Understanding these differences provides insight into the relationship between language, culture, and cognition.

Literature Review

The study of humor has been widely discussed in linguistics and philosophy. Victor Raskin introduced the Semantic Script Theory of Humor, which explains humor through the interaction of opposing scripts. Building on this, Salvatore Attardo developed the General Theory of Verbal Humor, incorporating pragmatic and discourse-level factors. From a pragmatic perspective, Paul Grice's Cooperative Principle plays a crucial role in understanding humor, particularly in cases where conversational maxims are intentionally violated. Additionally, scholars such as Geoffrey Leech have emphasized the importance of politeness and cultural norms in shaping communication.

In folkloristics, anecdotes are viewed as culturally embedded narratives that encode collective experience. Uzbek folklore, in particular, often features characters such as Nasreddin Afandi, whose humor reflects social criticism and wisdom.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative comparative approach. A corpus of Uzbek and English anecdotes was collected from published folklore sources and online databases. The selected anecdotes were analyzed based on:

- thematic content
- cultural references
- pragmatic strategies
- types of humor (irony, satire, absurdity, etc.)

The analysis focuses on identifying similarities and differences in how humor is constructed and interpreted in the two cultural contexts.

Analysis and Discussion

The inclusion of authentic anecdotes allows for a deeper understanding of how humor operates within specific cultural frameworks. The following examples illustrate key differences between Uzbek and English humorous traditions.

Uzbek Anecdotes

Consider the following Uzbek anecdote:

Afandi was asked: “Why do you always answer a question with another question?” He replied: “Why shouldn’t I?”

At first glance, the humor appears simple; however, it reflects a deeper pragmatic and cultural layer. The joke relies on a violation of conversational expectations, as described by Paul Grice. Instead of providing a direct answer, Afandi responds with another question, thereby creating humor through indirectness.

From a cultural perspective, this anecdote highlights the value of wit and intellectual agility in Uzbek society. The character of Afandi, widely recognized in Central Asian folklore, often uses humor to subtly challenge norms without direct confrontation. This aligns with collectivist communication styles, where indirectness is preferred to maintain social harmony.

Another example:

A man asked Afandi: “What is the fastest thing in the world?”
Afandi replied: “Thought. Because before you think of it, it has already arrived.”

This anecdote reflects philosophical depth combined with humor. Unlike purely entertaining jokes, Uzbek anecdotes often carry implicit wisdom or moral insight. The humor emerges from the unexpected yet meaningful answer, demonstrating the interplay between cognition and cultural values.

English Anecdotes

Humor in English is based on wordplay and ambiguity Now consider an English anecdote:

"I told my doctor I broke my arm in two places."
He said, "Stop going to those places."

Here, the phrase "two places" is interpreted literally by the doctor, creating a humorous misunderstanding. This aligns with the theories of Victor Raskin, where humor arises from the overlap of two incompatible scripts.

"Why don't scientists trust atoms?"
"Because they make up everything."

This joke relies on lexical ambiguity ("make up" meaning both "compose" and "invent"). The humor is largely language-dependent and requires knowledge of English semantics.

Unlike Uzbek anecdotes, these examples prioritize linguistic play and cognitive surprise over social or moral commentary. The humor is more individualistic and does not necessarily rely on shared cultural narratives. The comparison of these anecdotes reveals that Uzbek anecdotes often serve didactic purposes, while English jokes focus on entertainment. Also, uzbek humor relies on indirectness and context; English humor emphasizes explicit linguistic mechanisms. Uzbek humor reflects collectivism and social norms, whereas English humor highlights individual cognition and creativity.

These findings support the broader theoretical framework proposed by Salvatore Attardo, which emphasizes the importance of context and discourse in humor interpretation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that humor in Uzbek and English anecdotes is shaped by distinct cultural frameworks. While both traditions utilize similar narrative techniques, the meanings and functions of humor differ significantly. Uzbek humor emphasizes social cohesion and moral values, whereas English humor highlights individuality and cognitive play.

The research underscores the importance of considering cultural context in the study of humor and contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural communication.

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