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Comedy of Misunderstanding: A Socio-cognitive Analysis of Sitcom 'Mind Your Language'

Abstract

Misunderstanding is one of the significant issue of communication and therefore needs to be explored for successful accomplishment of communicative task. The study in hand attempts to understand the concept of misunderstanding and its impact on overall communication event. The "socio-cognitive approach to pragmatics" (SCA) as proposed by Istvan Kecskes and employed by Honghui & Dongchun (2019) provides theoretical underpinnings. Contrary to traditional pragmatics and cognitive pragmatics, SCA stands in the middle, tries to incorporate and explains linguistic phenomenon with both social and cognitive factors. This study attempts to inspect the concept of misunderstanding under SCA, with special reference to the view of Common Ground Co-construction in the multicultural setting. The study has taken 10 scenes from "Mind your Language" and has attempted to identify the instances of communication failure and misunderstanding, and its effect on overall process of interaction. The findings of the study demonstrate that missing common grounds (lack of linguistic, social and cultural knowledge) lead towards misunderstanding among the participants belonging to different cultures; subsequently causes a communication failure. This failure can be the basic reason of the conflict but within the given context, misunderstandings lead to hilarious comic situations. This sitcom exploits these instances of misunderstandings and missing common grounds to produce humorous effect. Hence, a new genre of comedy from intercultural pragmatic view can emerge, named as comedy of misunderstanding.

1. Introduction

Research in intercultural communication usually focuses on "encounters between human beings who have different first languages, communicate in a common language, and, usually represent different cultures" (Kecskes 2011, p. 372). Most predominantly this common language is English. The work of Blommaert (2010) and Garrett (2010) on language and globalization serves to remind that communication across cultural borders is now a common place and widespread phenomenon. Intercultural communication, according to Kecskes's (2011) definition is conceived as a situation in which interlocutors negotiate in a common language. Cogo & House (2017) define Intercultural pragmatics as an area of research categorized by a focus on discourse between members of various native languages and cultures. The familiar attribute of intercultural pragmatics is that interlocutors communicate not through a common language, but through a common and inter-lingual mediator, an interpreter.

The interaction in intercultural context is a bumpy road where chances of misunderstanding and misinterpretation are inevitable. Both the speaker and the hearer bring their past experiences, preset notions and perceptions to the new communication event where common grounds have to be co-constructed to escape misunderstanding. Kecskes (2010) considers misunderstanding as an "untidy" oral communication phenomenon, which constantly has a negative effect and has the potential to create conflicting situation for interlocutors. That is the reason, in the traditional pragmatic view, misunderstanding is often considered as verbal communication errors, and should be avoided by the interlocutors. It is suggested that misunderstandings cannot be restricted to just communicative "errors" in the broader sense, and therefore the root causes of this need further exploration.

The various media platforms depict the world in all its colors and spectrums. Modern media elucidates the significance of critical inquiry of intercultural communication across the globe. Many producers invested in via various television series and movies to examine the question of intercultural communication. Meager intercultural interaction and communication stimulates "stereotyping, societal challenges, and discrimination" (Bennett, 2013, p.

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38). The positive and encouraging side of most of these television series and films are that they help us to review and reinvestigate the question of cultural interaction. The study in hand is an endeavor in the same line to explore the comedy in the context of intercultural communication by examining the selective scenes from 'Mind your language'.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Misunderstanding is one of the important aspects of intercultural communication and is considered to be the root cause of confronting and conflicting situations. This study is an endeavor to explore the comic side of misunderstanding from the lens of intercultural communication and intercultural pragmatics.

1.2 Objectives of the study

- To investigate the inclination of interlocutors towards salience in the selected scenes of 'Mind your language'
- To examine the missing core common grounds in the multicultural interaction
- To analyse the effect of the missing common ground on overall meaning construction of the selected scene

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the important diverging points of interlocutors' attention and salience in the selected scenes?
2. What are the missing core grounds in the selected scenes?
3. How do the missing common grounds effect the overall meaning construction?

1.4 Significance of the study

As the world has turned out to be a global village, in the advanced high-tech world, the lingua franca communication is inevitable. The study in hand provides an insight into reasons of communication failure keeping in consideration the mixed-cultural setting where students from diverse nationalities have to interact in English lingua franca. The study is expected to be a valuable addition in already existing researches in the area of intercultural communication, media studies and intercultural pragmatics. The notions of common grounds, egocentrism and misunderstanding have been explored further which can provide an awareness regarding effective communication in multicultural setting. As a sitcom has been used as a sample, therefore, it is expected that the study can introduce a new perspective regarding understanding the comedy and humor.

1.5 Delimitation of the study

The study has been delimited to ten scenes from Mind your language. Furthermore, Kecskes' socio-cognitive approach has been used as theoretical framework but the focus is mainly on the notion of salience and common ground.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Sitcoms as representation of culture and intercultural communication

Esposito, J. (2009) investigates the issue of race in ABC's television sitcom *Ugly Betty* and analyzed the scene related to political actions and social decisions based on color. She argued that race and ethnic stratification are ever more existent in American society and that they need to be. Emphasizing that race is important in many ways including the political and social environment that often suggests race dare not speak its name.

Cao (2019) explored the representation of (im)politeness in Chinese sitcom discourse by employing Verbal Humor (Attardo, 1994) and (im)politeness theories (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This study analyzed humor and (im)politeness in Chinese sitcoms by interpreting the characteristics of aggressive and non-aggressive humor in the popular Chinese sitcoms: *I Apartment*. Four essential points were kept in consideration which are: pragmatic aspects of humor, the construction and interpretation of humor, the functions of humor for TV viewer and for the interaction among characters. lastly, the social and cultural aspect of humor in the context of China was also explored. The findings of the study demonstrated that characters in *I Apartment* displayed an obvious inclination towards aggressive humor than non-aggressive one. In *I Apartment*, the aggressive humor was deliberately exploited by the sender to entertain and amuse the audiences only; quite frequently created occurrences of blunt

antagonism between characters. These overt aggressive remarks serve as tools for dominance among characters. Furthermore, these aggressive remarks were considered impolite but yet a source of enhancing connection with the viewers.

Huang (2020) considers verbal humor as the part of everyday conversation. Humor is viewed as an art of language use by the western society. Therefore, for more effective communication, it is significant for second language learners to develop an understanding for the humor of the target language. The theory of Conversational Implicature provides theoretical underpinning. The study endeavors to examine the creation of verbal humor from the viewpoint of Gricean Cooperative Principle. *2 Broke Girls* is taken as the data, aiming to foster English learners' comprehensive ability of American humorous utterances and to develop their intercultural communication competence. McMullan, (2015) analyzed the cultural value of individualism-collectivism and its influence on interpersonal and intercultural communication, the way it is portrayed in film. This study added on to the field of intercultural communication by contributing to the way we comprehend how films showcase cultures and furthermore, how individualism-collectivism plays a significant role in intercultural interactions.

Akbari &Shahnazari, (2017) selected a sitcom 'Simpsons Family' to examine its translation into Persian from the perspective of politeness. The researcher questions that to what degree politeness translation strategies influence and deviate the Persian subtitling of 'The Simpsons sitcom. The findings demonstrated significant role of politeness translation strategies in deviating from the source text as politeness varies from culture to culture.

Moalla (2015) investigating the effective means to comprehend and communicate in intercultural context, analyses the way humor is co-constructed, comprehended and evaluated in multicultural setting. It is an endeavor to explain the means through which the British English speakers and Tunisian English learners use and interpret humor in face to face interactions. The aim of the study is to illustrate the way the participants' personal style and identity is demonstrated according to the kind of heteroglossic backdrop of the voices they build for their utterances and the way they engage with that backdrop. The dialogically expansive nature of the linguistic resources in the engagement system exposes the participants' readiness to handle the intercultural complications and to negotiate relationships of solidarity and alignment rather than relationships of distance and misalignment.

Filani (2021) by using the socio-cognitive approach, tried to explore the genre of comedy. He postulated that in pragmatics, it is a prevailing perspective that the comedian co-construct humor with the audience. The researcher argues that the communicative behaviour of stand-up comedian is also partially related to egocentrism. The study analysed the performance of the OkeyBakassi, a stand-up comedian from Nigerian, in Chicago. The researcher found out that egocentrism was one of the humor strategies of the comedian. By concentrating on the propositional content of the comedian's statements, the study discovered different strategies like, ad hoc coherence, concept formation, and privatization, which the comedian employed in individualizing the prior common ground to create the desirable incongruity for humor in the performance sphere.

2.2 Communication, common ground and misunderstanding

Shea (1994) and Bremer et al. (1996) stress that the situation of interaction, nature of discourse and delivery of an expression and interpretation within micro-context, can make interaction successful. They have presented a number of examples in second language learning where users are put in a different context and that makes a great contribution to understanding communicative competence. Communication in general is not an ideal transfer of information; instead, it is more like a trial-and-error process that is co-constructed by the participants. It is a non-summative and emergent interactional achievement (Arundale 2008). Consequently, the cooperative principle does not suffice for such revision of communication, and is proved vulnerable to fluctuations of mental resources that prefer egocentric interpretations (Strayer and Johnson 2001).

According to Moeschler (2004) misunderstandings are caused not by difficulty in drawing the intended implicature, but primarily by lack of access to the correct explicature of the utterance. The explicit vs. implicit nature of the conveyed meaning is the key to the explanation of pragmatic misunderstanding. This argument is based on some assumptions supported by Relevance Theory, namely the ostensive-inferential character of linguistic

communication and the difference between explicature and implicature. For instance, one parameter that increases the risk of misunderstanding is the quality of the audience's linguistic knowledge. The researcher hypothesizes that the greater the audience's mastery of the speaker's language, the greater the risk of intercultural misunderstanding. The reason is that speakers tend to attribute to non-native speakers' cultural background which is in due proportion to their own mastery of language and therefore do not necessarily imply the right explicature of the utterance.

Chi-Hé Elder and Michael Haugh (2018) opine that dominant accounts of "speaker meaning" in post-Gricean contextualist pragmatics tend to focus on single utterances, making the theoretical assumption that the object of pragmatic analysis is restricted to cases where speakers and hearers agree on utterance meanings, leaving instances of misunderstandings out of their scope. However, it is observed that divergences in understandings between interlocutors do often arise, and that when they do, speakers can engage in a local process of meaning negotiation. This study takes an account of interactional pragmatics to offer an empirically informed view on speaker meaning that incorporates both speakers' and hearers' perspectives, alongside a formalization of how to model speaker meanings in such a way that we can account for both understandings – the canonical cases – and misunderstandings, but critically, also the process of interactionally negotiating meanings between interlocutors. We highlight that utterance-level theories of meaning provide only a partial representation of speaker meaning as it is understood in interaction, and show that inferences about a given utterance at any given time are formally connected to prior and future inferences of participants. The researcher proposed model thus provides a more fine-grained account of how speakers converge on speaker meanings in real time, showing how such meanings are often subject to a joint endeavor of complex inferential work.

Kecskes' (2008) dynamic model of meaning highlights the significance of prior conversational experience and its relation to the lexical choices made by the interlocutors. The hearer and listener's understanding of what is conveyed in the actual situational context is determined by the prior conversational experience with the lexical items occurred in the utterances of both the speaker and the hearer.

Kaur (2014) negates the role of cultural background in creating misunderstanding in the lingua franca classroom. Basic misunderstandings are language-related, the source of many of the misunderstandings can be traced to ambiguity in the speaker's utterances. Other reasons for misunderstanding include mishearing and lack of world knowledge, namely, factors that also contribute to misunderstanding in intracultural communication. It is suggested that the diminished role of culture in such interactions stems from the lingua franca context of the interaction. Intent on arriving at mutual understanding in a language that is native to none of the participants, cultural differences are tolerated and often overlooked as the participants negotiate and co-construct understanding in the lingua franca.

The study in hand is related to the same lingua franca classroom created in the British sitcom 'Mind our language'. The study focuses on understanding the effect of the conversation where the common grounds are missing. Furthermore, the study reexamines the concept of misunderstanding apart from a source of conflict and confrontation.

3. Research Methodology

The researcher is qualitative in nature. The explanatory research design is used to answer the questions of "What's" and "How's". The main focus of the study is to explain the relationship between the missing common grounds and its impact on overall communication event. The study has purposively taken ten scenes from British sitcom "Mind your language" from YouTube. The dialogues were transcribed and analyzed in lieu of Socio-cognitive approach as given by Kecskes (2014).

3.1 Theoretical Framework

The SCA (Socio-cognitive approach) has postulated two claims. Firstly, it is theorized that both the speaker and listener are equal participants in communication. Both the interlocutors are engaged in the production and understanding of language constructed on their prior experience and, individual and collective knowledge. Subsequently, an utterance is interpreted from the perspective of both the speaker and the hearer which can offer an adequate explanation of communication. Speakers are individuals with their own background and cognitive abilities. The conversation between two speakers belonging to two different cultures may affect the

communication event as the meaning of the same structure may be viewed and perceived differently by both interactions.

The second construct of SCA is that communication is a dynamic and active process of meaning making and interpreting as both interlocutors who are involved in discourse are restricted by the social context as they produce and interpret at the same time. Thus, communication is considered as an interplay of two characteristics that cannot be separated, and both are supportive and interactive. It is also a display of intention and attention which is motivated by the social and cultural background of an individual. This approach gives the pragmatics view of cooperation, and a cognitive view of egocentrism. While cooperation is intention driven practice, egocentrism is attention oriented. Earlier deals with relevance and later with salience. It is an established fact that both Intention and attention are forces that can have a direct effect on communication.

4. Data analysis

The study in hand is the endeavor to understand the intercultural communication described in comic series Mind your language. The focus is laid up the missing common grounds and its impact on overall communication event. The characters in the dialogue present different countries and subsequently different cultures of the world.

4.1. Core Common Grounds

The core Common grounds are fixed, constant, and manufactured default way. Consequently it is considered as a presupposed knowledge. The core common grounds with the characteristic of social sharing, is the base of common everyday communication, and is the foundation for guaranteeing the identity of the language community (Honghui & Dongchun, 2019) But its sharing is not absolute, in fact it is something varies per scope and degree.

4.1.1. Core Concepts Failing

Normally linguistic representation (sound/shape) will activate the same conceptual features, but if the listener lacks the corresponding core concepts, that lead to incomprehension and subsequently misunderstanding. In this situation, the listener can inquire "What does XX mean?" which often happens in L2 setting as the native speaker lacks the corresponding core concept. In the given circumstances, the speaker incline to make guesses according to the linguistic representations. In the given dialogue from 'Mind our language', the teacher asks for to perform a role play where the setting is the restaurant. Teacher asks the Spanish student to have conversation with the Chinese student. Here at two stages serious misunderstanding take place. In the first place, the Spanish student, trying to converse, crack a joke regarding the marital status of the Chinese girl. It is perfectly fine in Spanish culture to have such intimate talk but is considered immoral in Chinese culture and hence, the girl slaps him on his face. Second time, a conflicting situation arises when the Chinese girl suggests to talk about communism, bourgeois and proletariats. The concepts were far too remote for the Spanish speaker to comprehend and to converse on, based on his lack of prior experience and hence, leads to communication failure. As these concepts are alien for Juan and expresses his incapability to converse on it. Hence an uncomfortable situation gets created due to the deficiency of understanding the core concepts while interacting in intercultural contexts.

Spanish man: Oh what I think.

Chinese girl: I don't link bad lever.

Spanish man: Cigarette

Chinese girl: I don't smoke. Bad for arm.

Spanish: I bet you're not married.

Chinese: (she slapped the man) you are very low!

Spanish: come on you are. I just make a joke but what you were to talk about.

Chinese: we could discuss, why the dictatorship of proletariat better than dictatorship or bourgeois tactics.

Spanish: I don't understand what you're talking about.

Second encounter of core concept failure has been observed when the teacher provides information about vowel letters and use it in multiple pairs of words. The first example given is 'fate' which is misinterpreted by the Spanish student as feet due to lack of the distinction between the two sounds and further its association with different concept. Next, another word 'Fete' is introduced, and again the same student provides the meaning of feet due to failure of differentiating between the sounds and further its corresponding concept. Lastly, the teacher introduces the word 'fit' which again is comprehended wrongly as feet by the Juan, the same Spanish student. Hence, here a misunderstanding arises due to deficient core concept, which consequently, leads towards comedy effect.

Teacher: Does anybody know, what the word 'Fate' means?

Juan: Fate a word.

Teacher: Yes, one word.

Juan: Two fate.

Teacher: Two fate?

Juan: Yes, one right fate and second left fate. (bangs his feet on the desks)

Teacher: No these are feet!

Juan: Yes, Feet.

Teacher: lets come to letter E, usually pronounced as /e/ as in /bet/ /set/ and /get/. There are more exceptions in rules. For example, Fete is also pronounced as fate.

Juan: Yes, that is one left and of right fate.

Teacher: No, No, not.

Juan: (mumbles in Spanish) sure, sure

Teacher: to move to letter 'I', pronounced as a ore. can anybody give me an example of /e/?

Ranjeet: /fi:t/(stretches the middle vowel)

Juan: See that it is on left and one right. (bangs his right feet on the right desks and left feet on left desk)

4.1.2 Missing Semantic Features and Cultural Characteristics

The 'concept deviation' leads to the failure of common ground co-construction and induces misunderstanding mainly in the different understanding of semantic features and cultural characteristics. The co-construction mechanism here is also based on "activating". Such misunderstandings are particularly prevalent in cross-regional and intercultural communication. In the given example a confusing situation arises due to the difference of cultural and social signification of the term 'pork'. For Mr. Brown, pork is a neutral term with no negative connotation associated with it. That is the reason he asks Ali a sentence using the word 'pork' in it. The teacher demonstrates egocentrism because the cultural implication of the other party has been totally ignored. Subsequently, due to the different cultural background, a new system of signification emerges and Ali demonstrated his egocentrism, intentionally, answers wrong because he feels uneasy to ignore his cultural learnings.

Teacher: Correct this sentence Ali, Waiter I would like some chops of pork.

Ali : Waiter, I would not like some chops of the pork.

Teacher: This is not right.

Ali: Yes please, It is against my religion to be eaten pork.

The second instance of deviant cultural characteristic can be viewed in the scene, where Jamila, a Bangladeshi student, presents a birthday gift to the teacher. It is a bell usually hung from the neck of the cow in Bangladeshi and

Indian culture. The use of word 'guy' has a different connotation in Hindi as refers to cow but the same has a different meaning in English. In this scene if on one hand the teacher misinterprets the meaning of 'guy' due to lack of linguistic knowledge on Hindi. Similarly, he fails to understand the cultural connotation associated with the term 'guy'. Cow is considered as a sacred animal in Hindi and called as mother. The gift which was given has a cultural value but was unnoticed by the teacher.

Jamila: Presents a bell as birthday gift to the teacher and says "Holy Guy"

Teacher: I am the holy guy?

Jamila: No Guy. (Then with the gestures of horns) guy!

4.2 Misunderstandings and Emergent Common ground co-construction Failures

The emergent common ground refers to relatively dynamic and changeable individual knowledge, including "individual shared information" and "contextual information". The former is mainly based on "activating" and the latter is mainly "seeking" and "creating". The main problem of the emergent common ground co-construction lies in the effective coordination of locally shared information, that is, the key factor is whether or not the other party can successfully recall the sharing information, and notice the specific situation focus or the new information created. Generally speaking, the richer the shared information, the more effective and smooth the communication is.

4.2.1 Situational Information Co-Construction Failures and Misunderstandings

Kecskes (2014) considers, only the situational factors that enter the attention of both parties are well-known; on the other hand, as the local shared information is co-constructed, the necessary prompting means are also indispensable. However, in the specific communication, the attention of both parties is still difficult to achieve perfect coordination, which is related to the attention of the communicator and the interference of cognitive tasks. In the given conversation the misunderstanding arises due to the lack of attention to the meaning. Max couldn't give attention to the instruction of the teacher and similarly, teacher failed to understand the wrong application of the instruction.

Teacher: Right now this evening, we're going to concentrate on the alphabet. I'll take a round of the class and I want each of you to give me a word beginning with a different letter from the alphabet.

Max, we'll start with you 'a'.

Max: a desk

Teacher: No Max, desk doesn't begin with a letter 'a'. I want a word beginning with the letter 'a'.

Max: A door

Teacher: Good "adore".

Ali: I am confused! Why a desk is wrong but a door correct.

Teacher: Because adore is a verb not a door. Isn't it Max?

Max: (Looking confused) As you wish????

4.2.2 Local Shared Information Co-Construction Failures and Misunderstandings

Although, it has been postulated by Honghui & Dongchun, (2019) that the more the shared information, the smoother the interactional process. The main difficulty of the emergent common ground co-construction resides in the active coordination of locally shared information, that is, the central factor in whether other party can successfully recollect the shared information, and is attentive towards the specific situation emergence or the new information created. The given conversation provides a description of the situation where the common context is shared but the hearer fails to recollect the shared information, excessively relies on his egocentrism, miscarries the interpretation of the instructions and therefore, causes a failed communication.

Teacher: You have to give me a sentence using 'you are'. Ali 'you are'....

Ali.....You are waiting for me to speak an answer?

Teacher: Well done!

Ali: unfortunately, I am not understanding the question.

Teacher: I want you to give me a sentence using you are.

Ali: I am.

Teacher: Not I am, you are. For example, you are from Pakistan.

Ali: I am from Pakistan.

Teacher: Yes, but now use you are .

Ali: But I cannot say you are from Pakistan because you are not.

Teacher: repeat after me, " you are English".

Ali. No No, I am from Pakistan.

Teacher: What am I?

Ali: You are confusing me!

In the above give example, Ali and Mr. Brown share a lot of personal information. Both are well familiar with the context of the use of English language but faced difficulty in co-constructing common grounds. Ali failed to understand the intention of teacher and similarly teacher also couldn't provide a common ground to successfully send his message across. In addition, Teacher did not specify what he wants, he starts the conversation with "Ali, You are.....", the teacher presupposes that Ali already knows the context which leads to the local shared information co-construction failure and misunderstanding. This also shows that in the process of Common Ground co-construction, listeners are not always passively activated, but their subjectivity and initiative will also cause misunderstandings.

4.3 Findings and Discussion

The study explores the causes of misunderstanding and the impact of common missing common grounds on overall communication event. The study demonstrates, the interlocutors in the sitcom have the tendency to rely more on their prior knowledge than to rely on the situationally co-constructed knowledge. The characters are more egocentric and hence fail to understand the interaction in new situation. Such communication failure gives rise to humorous situation and turn to be the source of amusement for the viewers. Filani (2021) also demonstrated the same research finding where he questioned the prevailing notion that the comedian and the audience co-construct the comic situations He demonstrated that the egocentrism is a strategy used for humor.

The study finds that cultural knowledge is one of the key factor in constituting misunderstanding in the intercultural communication as given in the sitcom. Kaur(2014) diverges on this point and considers certain other factors, including mishearing, linguistic deficiency, contextual and pragmatic competence failure, as also pivotal in creating misunderstanding in lingua franca classroom.

The study introduces a new term in the genre of comedy as the comedy of misunderstanding, because main source of humor in the selected sitcom is based on the misunderstandings stimulates due to lack of core semantic concepts, linguistic and cultural common grounds deficiency or due to absence of pragmatic competence. Therefore, the whole comic situation circulated around the core concept of misunderstanding in various forms. Cao (2019) in his study on Chinese sitcom Ipartmentsuggests that impoliteness strategies wereemployed to create humorous situation in the sitcom. The aggressive humor was used between characters to dominate each other and further to appeal and entertain the viewer. In the present study the misunderstanding, missing common grounds,

linguistic incompetence, and ignorance of cultural and pragmatic competence are employed as strategies for creating humor and comedy in the selected sitcom.

5. Conclusion

The study explored the root cause of misunderstanding in a multicultural setting using a social-cognitive approach. The research analyzed the stimulation of misunderstanding due to lack of common ground co-construction, including core ground co-construction failure and the emergent common ground co-construction failure in the sitcom 'Mind Your Language'. The study found that egocentrism can offer an overall explanation of different instances of misunderstandings. The characters only, from the self-cognition and self-perspective, estimated the information that the interlocutor knew; on the other hand, listener, based on the prior knowledge and situational focus and attention, only drew some related connotations and reasoning according to the linguistic representation. The result of the study demonstrated that although the participants are willing to cooperate to accomplish a conversation, there is no guarantee that all explicit-inferential processes can be achieved as a mutual understanding, and certain common ground co-construction failures and misunderstandings are inevitably come into being. This misunderstanding can be the cause of conflicting situation but similarly can have a comic and humorous effect. As we are well familiar with the terms like: romantic comedy, comedy of error, comedy of manner, in similar line, from intercultural perspective a new term is introduced as comedy of misunderstanding.

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