

Humorous Language in English Sitcoms from the Perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics: A Case Study of Friends

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the linguistic mechanisms and contextual triggers of humorous language in English sitcoms from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), with the classic American sitcom Friends as the core corpus. It focuses on Halliday's three metafunctions and register theory to analyze how humorous effects form through the interaction between lexical-grammatical choices and situational contexts. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study selects typical humorous dialogues from Friends. These dialogues cover diverse scenarios such as daily chats, interpersonal conflicts, and special occasions, and span all ten seasons of the sitcom to ensure representativeness. From the SFL lens, humor is realized through specific linguistic patterns: transitivity deviations in the ideational function, mood metaphors and modality mismatches in the interpersonal function, and thematic structure variations plus unexpected new information placement in the textual function. From the register theory perspective, field deviations, tenor mismatches, and mode features jointly act as contextual triggers for humor. The research concludes that Friends' humor results from the synergy of Systemic Functional Linguistics-based lexical-grammatical choices and register-situational interactions. It enriches the application of SFL in sitcom humor studies and provides practical insights, helping English learners improve their appreciation of sitcom humor by grasping the linguistic rules of English humorous language, and offering references for sitcom creators to design contextually fitting humorous content.

Keywords

Systemic Functional Linguistics; English Sitcoms; Humorous Language; Humorous Expression Techniques; Friends

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

English sitcoms serve as influential carriers of humorous language and cultural communication, with Friends as a classic example. Aired from 1994 to 2004, this

sitcom enjoys global popularity, vividly reflecting American daily life, interpersonal interactions, and social values through its dialogues. Beyond entertainment, it has become a key material for studying how humor is embedded in everyday English, making it ideal for humorous linguistic research.

Humor studies are interdisciplinary, but traditional theories have limitations in explaining linguistic-level humor mechanisms. The Superiority Theory attributes humor to a sense of superiority over others' flaws, yet fails to account for benign humor like Friends' friendly teasing. The Incongruity Theory focuses on cognitive contradictions between expectation and reality, but rarely explores how specific linguistic structures shape such incongruity. The Relief Theory views humor as tension release, overlooking language's role in constructing humor. These theories prioritize psychology or cognition over language's concrete realization.

SFL addresses this gap with unique academic value. As a social semiotic framework, SFL emphasizes language's functional nature, linking language choices to context (communication topics, relationships, mediums) and detailing how humor is built through lexical-grammatical structures (sentence processes, mood types, information arrangement). Its three metafunctions unpack humor's multi-dimensional roles: describing absurd scenarios, regulating interpersonal dynamics, and organizing humorous information. This systematic lens enables analysis of how language and context interact to produce humor, laying a solid foundation for exploring humorous language in Friends and other English sitcoms.

1.2. Research Purpose and Significance

This study aims to systematically explore the linguistic mechanisms of humorous language in English sitcoms from the perspective of SFL, with Friends as the core corpus. It focuses on two core SFL components—Halliday's three metafunctions and register theory—to clarify how humorous effects are built via lexical-grammatical choices under metafunctions, how register variables (field, tenor, mode) interact with language to trigger humor, and to summarize typical humorous language patterns in Friends and their contextual influencing factors.

Theoretically, this study expands SFL's application scope. Existing SFL research mostly focuses on formal discourses (e.g., academic papers, news) and rarely applies its metafunctions or register theory to informal humorous discourse like sitcom dialogues; this study fills this gap by verifying SFL's explanatory power in humorous discourse, enriching the interdisciplinary integration of SFL and humor studies. It also complements traditional humor theories (e.g., Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory), which overemphasize psychology or cognition while ignoring concrete linguistic structures, providing a more detailed "language-centric" analytical framework for humor research.

Practically, it offers value for two key groups. For English learners, it helps them move beyond superficial sitcom humor understanding (e.g., relying on subtitles) to

grasp the linguistic rules of English humorous language—such as how transitivity deviations or mood metaphors create humor—enhancing both their humor appreciation ability and cross-cultural communication competence. For sitcom creators, it summarizes contextually appropriate humorous patterns (e.g., matching tenor for casual teasing, leveraging mode for oral improvisation humor) and provides references for designing dialogues that align with linguistic logic and situational needs, avoiding rigid or contextually inappropriate humor.

1.3. Research Questions

To achieve the above research purpose, this study proposes three core research questions:

- How are the three metafunctions of SFL reflected in the humorous language of *Friends*? Specifically, what lexical-grammatical devices are used under each metafunction to construct humorous effects?
- How do the three variables of register theory interact with linguistic choices to trigger humorous effects in *Friends*?
- What typical patterns of humorous language emerge from the SFL-based analysis of *Friends*? And what contextual factors influence the formation and application of these patterns?

1.4. Research Methodology and Corpus Selection

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative descriptive analysis to explore humorous language in *Friends*. Qualitative analysis serves as the core, focusing on interpreting the mechanisms of humor construction through SFL categories—for instance, analyzing how transitivity deviations under the ideational function or mood metaphors under the interpersonal function generate humor, and unpacking the interaction between register variables and linguistic choices. Quantitative analysis complements this by counting the frequency of key lexical-grammatical devices in humorous dialogues, such as the distribution of transitivity process types (material, mental, relational processes) and mood types (declarative, interrogative, imperative), to identify dominant patterns of language use in humor construction.

For corpus selection, three principles are followed to ensure validity and representativeness. First, the corpus covers all ten seasons of *Friends* to avoid seasonal bias and reflect the show's consistent as well as evolving humorous language features. Second, only dialogues with explicit humorous markers are included—specifically, those accompanied by background laughter in the original show (a direct indicator of intended humor) and widely recognized as humorous by audiences (verified through existing fan discussions and humor studies on the sitcom). Third, situational contexts are diversified, encompassing daily chats at Central Perk, family interactions, workplace scenarios, and interpersonal conflicts, to align with the mul-

ti-dimensional analysis of register theory. Based on these principles, 120–150 typical humorous dialogue excerpts are finally selected as the core corpus for in-depth analysis.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Traditional Theories of Humor

Traditional humor theories include the Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Relief Theory. The Superiority Theory, originating from Aristotle's discussions on comedy and developed by Hobbes, holds that humor comes from the audience's sense of superiority over others' flaws or misfortunes (Zhao Ting, 2012), yet it fails to explain the "benign humor" in *Friends*—such as Joey teasing Chandler's awkward speech or Monica joking about Ross's dinosaur obsession—which aims to strengthen friendship based on shared experiences rather than highlighting superiority (Wang Jiali, 2022). The Incongruity Theory, proposed by Kant and supplemented by Schopenhauer, argues humor arises from the contradiction between cognitive expectations and unexpected reality; when an expectation formed by experience or logic is suddenly broken, the incongruity triggers laughter (Zhao Ting, 2012). The Relief Theory, represented by Freud, posits humor releases suppressed psychological tension—constrained by social norms and ethics in daily life—through socially acceptable means (Zhao Ting, 2012); in *Friends*, this is seen in Chandler's self-deprecating joke easing Rachel and Ross's argument tension (He Huan, 2024) and Phoebe's joke about "living on air" lightening the group's financial stress (Wang Jiali, 2022).

2.2. Linguistic Studies of Humor

From the linguistic perspective, humor research covers three main branches: pragmatic, cognitive linguistic, and functional linguistic. The pragmatic perspective explores humor based on Grice's Cooperative Principle, Leech's Politeness Principle, and Austin and Searle's Speech Act Theory—for example, humor in *Friends* often arises from deliberate violations of the Cooperative Principle's maxims, such as Chandler's use of deliberate ambiguity to create funny effects (Du Shuyu, 2024; Jin Jing & Zhang Xiaowei, 2008; Wang Yanyan, 2009). The cognitive linguistic perspective applies theories like Fauconnier & Turner's Conceptual Blending Theory and Raskin's Script Theory to analyze humor; however, such studies have limitations, as they overemphasize internal cognitive processes while paying insufficient attention to how language functionally realizes humor in specific contexts, which is evident in analyses of *Friends*' humor (Liu Fang, 2013). The functional linguistic perspective, centered on Halliday's metafunctions and register theory, has been applied in humor studies, but current research faces gaps: there are few systematic analyses of sitcom humor, and in particular, there is a lack of in-depth exploration of *Friends*'

humorous language from the lexical-grammatical level of SFL (Tong Juan, 2006; Zhao Ting, 2012).

2.3. Studies on Friends' Humor

Existing research on Friends' humor covers multiple dimensions. In terms of cultural connotations, scholars have analyzed how the show reflects American mainstream culture—such as the emphasis on individualism—through humorous dialogues. For example, when Rachel quit her waitress job to pursue a career in fashion, her friends' humorous encouragement embodies support for personal career choices (Wang Jiali, 2022). In terms of pragmatic strategies, studies have focused on how characters use linguistic devices like irony to create humor. For instance, when Chandler received a bad gift, he said, "This is exactly what I've always wanted... to have a thing that takes up space in my closet", using the contrast between literal and implied meanings to generate humor (Shi Lina, 2021). In terms of cognitive mechanisms, researchers have applied Script Theory to interpret specific humorous scenes, such as Ross's "old friends" referring to dinosaur fossils (Liu Fang, 2013).

However, existing studies have obvious gaps. There is no systematic analysis framework based on SFL, and the dynamic interaction between language and context in humor generation is underdiscussed—for example, how register variables influence the choice of humorous language forms in Friends.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Halliday's Three Metafunctions

Halliday's SFL defines three metafunctions of language, key to analyzing Friends' humor. The Ideational Metafunction describes the objective world and subjective experiences, with its core being the transitivity system (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, existential processes). Humor here comes from "process deviation" or "participant mismatch"—for example, Phoebe claiming her plants "hate loud music", treating non-humans as human-like participants to create absurdity.

The Interpersonal Metafunction builds and maintains social relationships, relying on the mood system (indicative, imperative, interrogative) and modality system (probability, usuality, obligation). Humor arises from "mood metaphor" or "modality mismatch", such as Chandler using an interrogative ("Could you not sing in the shower?") to implicitly command, subverting expected clause functions.

The Textual Metafunction organizes information and ensures coherence, centered on thematic structure (theme & rheme) and information structure (given & new information). Humor stems from "new information unexpectedness"—like Chandler replying to "How was your day?" with "I argued with a vending machine... it won", where the absurd "it won" breaks cognitive expectations.

3.2. Register Theory

Register is a key concept in SFL, referring to language's functional varieties shaped by situational context. It has three core variables, each influencing language use and humor generation in *Friends*. Field refers to the social activity and communication topic of a speech event. In *Friends*, this includes casual scenarios such as daily chats at Central Perk and more formal scenarios like workplace discussions about Monica's catering business. Field guides lexical-grammatical choices: casual fields favor colloquial language, while formal fields require polished expressions. Humor emerges when field expectations are violated, such as Ross using academic terms during a casual dinner.

Tenor describes the social relationship and emotional attitude between communicators. In *Friends*, this ranges from equal and intimate friendships among the six protagonists to unequal power dynamics, such as the relationship between Monica and her restaurant staff or between Joey and his agent. Humor arises when role norms for a given tenor are broken, like Joey acting overly casual with his agent during a serious contract discussion.

Mode refers to the communication channel or medium. In *Friends*, common modes include oral dialogue during friends' face-to-face conversations and written notes, such as Chandler leaving prank notes for Joey. Humor here comes from "medium mismatch". For example, Phoebe uses a handwritten note—typically used for formal reminders—to tease Rachel about her messy room, subverting the medium's expected function.

3.3. The Interface Between Metafunctions and Register Theory

A central tenet of SFL is the dynamic interface between metafunctions and register. Metafunctions operate at the lexical-grammatical level, while register operates at the situational context level, and register variables constrain how metafunctions are realized in language. For example, a formal field—such as Ross's museum lecture—limits the transitivity process types of the ideational function, favoring relational or verbal processes over casual behavioral processes. A close tenor, such as friends' chats, allows casual mood choices in the interpersonal function, such as using imperative clauses to suggest grabbing coffee without excessive formality.

For analyzing humor in *Friends*, this interaction is the core mechanism of humor construction. Register variables shape the lexical-grammatical choices of metafunctions, and humor arises when these choices deliberately deviate from the expectations set by the situational context. This deviation can take the form of mismatched processes in the ideational metafunction, subverted moods in the interpersonal metafunction, or unexpected information organization in the textual metafunction.

4. SFL Analysis of Humorous Language in *Friends*

4.1. Ideational Metafunction and Humor Construction

The ideational metafunction constructs humor primarily through deviations in the transitivity system, which manifest in abnormal relationships between core elements of different process types, creating absurdity or incongruity that aligns with the cognitive logic of humor.

In terms of material process deviation, humor arises from abnormal “actor-goal” relationships. Material processes describe actions or events involving actors and goals, and when the scale, intensity, or logic of the actor’s action toward the goal deviates from daily experience, humor emerges. For example, Joey’s line “I ate a whole pizza by myself in 10 minutes” exaggerates the material process of “eating”: the quantity of the goal (“a whole pizza”) and the time of the action (“10 minutes”) far exceed the normal scope of a person’s eating behavior, creating absurdity that triggers laughter.

Mental process deviation generates humor through mismatched “senser-phenomenon” pairs. Mental processes involve sensors (the subject of cognitive or emotional activities) and phenomena (the object of the senser’s cognition or emotion), and humor occurs when the phenomenon does not match the senser’s cognitive or emotional capacity. Phoebe’s line “I think my plant hates me” is a typical case: plants, as non-human entities, do not possess the human mental state of “hating”, yet Phoebe attributes this emotional phenomenon to a plant senser, violating basic cognitive logic and forming a funny contrast between the senser and the phenomenon.

Relational process deviation creates humor via illogical “carrier-attribute” or “token-value” relationships. Relational processes establish connections between carriers (entities with attributes) and attributes (characteristics of carriers), or tokens (specific entities) and values (meanings represented by tokens). When this connection deviates from objective reality, humor is produced. Ross’s line “My sandwich is a work of art” distorts the relational process: a sandwich, as a daily food carrier, is assigned the attribute of “a work of art”—a value typically associated with creative works—resulting in an exaggerated and illogical attribute-carrier relationship that generates incongruous humor.

In case analysis, Chandler’s joke about “working as a data analyst” can be taken as an example. He often distorts the material process of “working”: when describing his job, he may say “I sit in front of the computer all day, pretending to understand what those numbers mean”, deliberately weakening the professional nature of the data analyst’s work process and replacing it with a casual, perfunctory action description. This deviation from the normal material process of professional work creates self-deprecating humor. Additionally, quantitative statistics on transitivity process types in the corpus (such as counting the frequency of material, mental, and relational process deviations in humorous dialogues) can further verify the correlation between transitivity system deviations and humor frequency—usually, the higher the frequency of process deviations, the more prominent the humorous effect.

4.2. Interpersonal Metafunction and Humor Construction

The interpersonal metafunction builds humor mainly through the mood and modality systems: adjusting mood types or modifying modality values subverts expected communication norms, creating a playful or contradictory atmosphere that elicits humor.

In the mood system, mood metaphor generates humor by using a mismatched mood for a communicative function. Normally, commands use the imperative mood, but the indicative mood softens directness and adds playfulness. For example, Monica's line "You might want to clean your room" uses the indicative mood (instead of "Clean your room") to imply a command; the tentative "might want to" creates a humorous contrast between the underlying request and surface statement.

Imperative mood abuse also creates humor: excessive or inappropriate imperatives break communication harmony. Joey's line "Pass the chips! Now!" uses the imperative mood with "Now!" to exaggerate urgency, highlighting his food obsession. This overly direct expression deviates from gentle friend communication norms, making his character vividly funny.

In the modality system, modality mismatch is a key humor source. Mixing high and low modality values creates logical contradictions—Phoebe's line "I definitely maybe saw a ghost" combines "definitely" (high certainty) and "maybe" (uncertainty), making the "seeing a ghost" proposition ambiguous and absurd.

Subjective modality overuse constructs humor by exaggerating personal attitude. Chandler's line "I totally think I'm the funniest person here" uses "totally" to over-emphasize his self-judgment; this deviates from modest friend communication, creating self-deprecating humor about his overconfidence.

In case analysis, Ross and Rachel's "divorce" quarrel uses interpersonal humor: Rachel's line "You call that a reason for divorce?" uses the interrogative mood (instead of indicative) to emphasize dissatisfaction, subverting the interrogative's normal function and turning tension into humor. Corpus analysis confirms mood metaphor and modality mismatch are more likely to produce strong humor in friend interactions.

4.3. Textual Metafunction and Humor Construction

The textual metafunction shapes humor by adjusting thematic and information structures—changing thematic element positions or information distribution breaks the audience's expected information rhythm, with unexpectedness as the core of humor.

In thematic structure, thematic fronting generates humor by placing unusual components (e.g., objects, complements) in the theme position (normally for subjects or time adverbials). For example, Chandler's line "That guy, he stole my joke" uses "that guy" (the object of "stole") as the theme instead of the subject "he." This fronting emphasizes the complaint target and starts the statement with an unexpected ele-

ment, highlighting the absurdity of “stealing a joke.”

Thematic repetition also creates humor: repeating the same theme in consecutive clauses exaggerates a speaker’s trait or obsession. Joey’s line “Food, food, food — that’s all I think about” repeats “food” three times as the theme, emphasizing his food obsession and making his character vividly funny.

In information structure, new information unexpectedness is a main humor source. Placing absurd new information at the clause end (the information focus) breaks cognitive expectations. Phoebe’s line “I got a job — as a masseuse for a dog” first conveys “got a job” (normal new info), then adds “for a dog” (unexpected, as massages are usually for humans)—the contrast triggers laughter.

Given information distortion works by twisting shared known content. Ross’s line “We were on a break! — a break that lasted 10 minutes” distorts “break” (normally a longer separation) to 10 minutes to defend himself. The contradiction between distorted and original info makes his defense absurd.

In case analysis, Chandler’s sarcastic monologues use textual metafunction to control humor rhythm. For example: “Work today was great. I sat at my desk, stared at the screen, and realized — I have no idea what I’m doing.” Thematic shift (from “Work today” to “I”) and information contrast (positive “great” vs. negative “no idea”) create layered sarcasm, with “positive expectation + negative reversal” enhancing humor. Corpus analysis further shows object thematic fronting and end-positioned absurd new info are the most common textual humor strategies in *Friends*.

5. Register Theory and Humor Triggers in *Friends*

5.1. Field and Humor

Field (social activity/topic) triggers humor through deviations from expected topic norms or behavioral rules, paired with distinct lexical-grammatical features.

In the daily chat field (e.g., the six protagonists’ casual talks), humor comes from exaggerating trivial topics—such as their chat about “who stole the last cookie”, where overfocus on a minor matter creates relatable daily humor. Lexical-grammatical features here include casual verbs (e.g., “grab”, “chill”) and colloquial phrases.

In the special topic field (e.g., Ross explaining dinosaur knowledge to Joey), humor arises from “knowledge gap” adjustments: Ross simplifies professional terms to make complex topics accessible, and the contrast between professional content and casual delivery generates humor. Lexical-grammatical features mix professional vocabulary (e.g., “fossil”) with casual expressions.

A typical case is *Friends*’ “Thanksgiving Dinner” episodes: the field is “family celebration”, and humor comes from field deviation—Joey putting a turkey on his head, which violates the behavioral norms of a celebration field and creates absurdity.

5.2. Tenor and Humor

Tenor (social relationship/emotional attitude) generates humor by breaking role expectations or emotional consistency, with vocabulary and mood adapting to relationship types.

In equal tenor (friendship), humor stems from “friendly teasing”—e.g., Chandler teasing Joey’s acting skills. He uses casual mood and low-modality expressions (e.g., “Maybe you could try not to shout?”) to keep the tone friendly while creating humor.

In unequal tenor (power relationships), humor comes from “role reversal”—e.g., Monica (as a chef) being teased by her assistant. This subverts the boss-employee power order, and lexical-grammatical features shift: formal tenor uses polite modality (e.g., “Could you please...”), while informal tenor adopts casual mood.

In emotional tenor, humor arises from “emotional contrast”—e.g., Ross’s excitement about a “fossil discovery” clashing with Rachel’s indifference. The mismatch triggers humor, with lexical-grammatical features including emotional adjectives (e.g., “thrilled”, “bored”) and exclamatory mood.

A case in point is dialogues between Ross and his students: the tenor is “teacher-student”, and humor comes from Ross’s “over-professional” explanations contrasting with students’ confusion, violating the communication expectations of a teacher-student tenor.

5.3. Mode and Humor

Mode (communication channel/medium) creates humor through medium-specific limitations or content-form mismatches, with syntax and expression adapting to the medium.

In oral mode (face-to-face dialogue), humor relies on “real-time interaction”—e.g., Phoebe’s impromptu songs at Central Perk. She uses oral improvisation and tone variation (e.g., sudden high notes) to create humor, with features including ellipsis (e.g., “Forgot the lyrics—oops!”), repetition, and onomatopoeia.

In written mode (notes, letters), humor comes from “textual mismatch”—e.g., Chandler leaving a “breakup note” to Janice. He uses a formal written structure to convey absurd breakup reasons (e.g., “Your laugh sounds like a foghorn”), and the contrast between form and content generates humor.

In hybrid mode (phone calls, video chats), humor arises from “medium limitations”—e.g., Joey’s phone call to his agent. He misinterprets the agent’s tone due to the lack of visual cues, and features include simple syntax and clear information to compensate for medium constraints.

A classic case is the episode where Ross (in China) video calls Rachel: the mode is “long-distance video”, and humor is triggered by the medium’s limitations—signal delay causes awkward pauses, and cultural misunderstandings (e.g., Ross misexplaining Chinese food) add to the funny effect.

6. Discussion

6.1. Typical Patterns of Humorous Language in Friends

From the perspective of SFL, the humorous language in *Friends* presents three typical interaction patterns, which fully reflect the synergy or conflict between metafunctions and between metafunctions and register.

Pattern 1: Ideational-Interpersonal Interaction

This pattern combines transitivity deviation (ideational metafunction) with mood metaphor (interpersonal metafunction) to generate humor. The distortion of the transitivity process lays the foundation for absurdity, while the choice of mood type adjusts the interpersonal tone, making the humor both logical and contextually appropriate. For example, Chandler's line "I'm a data analyst — which means I stare at a screen and pretend to work" first uses a relational process to define his job identity (ideational), but then distorts the material process of "working as a data analyst" (replacing professional work with "staring and pretending"); at the same time, he adopts a declarative mood to convey this self-mocking content, softening the negative implication of job trivialization through a calm interpersonal tone, and forming a funny contrast between the serious job title and the trivial work description.

Pattern 2: Textual-Register Interaction

Humor is created by matching the textual metafunction (especially thematic structure) with register variables (especially tenor). Thematic structure adjusts the information focus, while tenor defines the interpersonal relationship context, ensuring that the humor is in line with the communication scenario. For instance, in friendly chats (equal tenor), Joey often uses thematic fronting of "food" — such as "Food, I need to grab some before the store closes" — placing "food" in the theme position to emphasize his core demand. This textual choice not only highlights his food-obsessed character but also adapts to the casual, unconstrained communication atmosphere of equal tenor, avoiding the stiffness of formal thematic structures and generating relaxed daily humor.

Pattern 3: Cross-Metafunction Mismatch

Humor arises from conflicting realizations of different metafunctions: one metafunction follows normal logic to maintain contextual rationality, while another deviates to create absurdity. Phoebe's line "My cat is my therapist" is a typical example: from the interpersonal metafunction, this relational process conveys her intimacy with the cat, which is in line with her eccentric but warm character and maintains emotional rationality; however, from the ideational metafunction, the relational process of "cat = therapist" violates objective logic (therapists are human professionals), and the contradiction between interpersonal emotional rationality and ideational logical absurdity forms a unique, playful humor.

6.2. Contextual Factors Influencing Humor Construction

The humor in *Friends* is not only shaped by linguistic forms but also deeply influenced by cultural, situational, and character contexts, which together determine the

generation and reception of humor.

American cultural values such as individualism and casualness are embedded in humorous language, making humor carry cultural specificity. For example, Rachel's "pursuit of personal independence" — such as her joke "I left my fiancé at the altar and now I'm eating pizza for breakfast" — uses the behavior of breaking traditional marriage norms (a reflection of individualism) and the casual lifestyle of "eating pizza for breakfast" (a reflection of daily casualness) to create humor. This humor relies on the audience's understanding of American cultural tolerance for individual choices and casual daily habits; without this cultural background, the humorous effect may be weakened.

Fixed scenarios (as "humor containers") provide a repeated and familiar context for humor, allowing the audience to quickly grasp the humor logic through scenario associations. Central Perk and Monica's apartment are core situational contexts: in Central Perk, the fixed setting of "friends sitting on the sofa chatting" allows repeated humor from regular interactions — such as Chandler making fun of Gunther's unrequited love for Rachel, or Phoebe singing impromptu songs. The familiarity of the scenario reduces the audience's cognitive burden, making it easier to perceive the subtleties of humor (e.g., the contrast between Gunther's silent jealousy and Chandler's teasing).

The consistent personalities of the protagonists shape their unique humor styles, ensuring that humorous language is in line with character settings and enhancing the authenticity and memorability of humor. For example, Chandler's humor is dominated by sarcasm — he often uses self-mockery like "I'm great at giving advice; I just suck at taking it" to cope with awkward situations; Phoebe's humor is marked by eccentricity, such as her belief that "plants have feelings" and the absurd jokes derived from it. These humor styles are closely linked to their personalities (Chandler's insecurity under sarcasm, Phoebe's alternative worldview), making each joke a "character-specific" expression rather than an isolated linguistic game.

6.3. Implications for English Learners and Sitcom Creators

The analysis of Friends' humorous language based on SFL provides practical implications for both English learners (in humor appreciation) and sitcom creators (in humor design).

To effectively understand and appreciate the humor in Friends, learners can adopt two core strategies: first, identify metafunctional deviations — focus on how transitivity processes (ideational), mood types (interpersonal), and thematic structures (textual) deviate from normal logic (e.g., Phoebe's mental process deviation of "plants hate me"), which is the linguistic basis of humor; second, analyze register variables — clarify how field (topic), tenor (relationship), and mode (medium) shape humor (e.g., Joey's casual thematic choice in equal tenor). Additionally, learners should combine SFL analysis with cultural learning: for example, understanding

the cultural connotation of “individualism” behind Rachel’s jokes, or the casual communication norms reflected in friends’ dialogues, to avoid missing humor due to cultural gaps.

When designing humorous language, creators can follow two key principles: first, match lexical-grammatical choices with register — ensure that linguistic forms are consistent with the scenario (field), relationship (tenor), and medium (mode) to avoid unnatural humor. For example, in a workplace field (formal tenor), use polite modality (e.g., “Could we possibly adjust the plan?”) to create humor through mild deviations, rather than overly casual expressions; second, use metafunctional interactions to create layered humor — combine ideational deviation with interpersonal tone adjustment (like Chandler’s self-mocking) or textual focus with register context (like Joey’s thematic fronting), making humor have both linguistic depth and contextual appropriateness. Specifically, creators can reference Friends’ “tenor-based humor” pattern: design character-specific jokes based on interpersonal relationships (e.g., equal tenor for friendly teasing, unequal tenor for role reversal), ensuring that humor is not only funny but also helps shape characters and promote plot development.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Summary of Major Findings

This study, grounded in SFL and Register Theory, explores the construction mechanism of humorous language in Friends and arrives at three core findings. First, the three metafunctions of SFL contribute to humor in distinct, targeted ways: the ideational metafunction generates humor primarily through deviations in the transitivity system—such as abnormal actor-goal relationships in material processes or mismatched sensor-phenomenon pairs in mental processes; the interpersonal metafunction relies on mismatches in the mood and modality systems, including mood metaphor (e.g., using indicative mood to convey commands) or contradictory combinations of high and low modality values; the textual metafunction shapes humor via variations in thematic and information structures, like thematic fronting of unusual elements or placing absurd new information at clause ends.

Beyond metafunctions, register variables interact with linguistic choices to act as key humor triggers. Field defines the topic scope of humor—for instance, trivial exaggerations in daily chat fields or knowledge gaps in special topic fields—while tenor determines the interpersonal tone, ranging from casual teasing in equal friendships to absurdity from role reversal in unequal power relationships. Mode, in turn, shapes humor’s expression form: real-time improvisation characterizes oral mode, while content-form mismatch drives humor in written mode.

These elements further converge into three typical patterns of humorous language in Friends, all rooted in the interaction between SFL metafunctions and Register Theory. These patterns include ideational-interpersonal interaction (combining

transitivity deviation with mood metaphor), textual-register interaction (matching thematic structure with tenor), and cross-metafunction mismatch (conflicting logical and emotional rationality across metafunctions). Together, they confirm that humor in *Friends* is not random linguistic play but a systematic combination of functional language choices and contextual adaptation.

7.2. Limitations of the Study

Despite its findings, this study has two notable limitations. On the corpus side, the analysis draws on 120-150 dialogue excerpts selected from *Friends*. While these excerpts capture common humor types, they cannot fully cover the diverse humorous expressions across the sitcom's 10 seasons—such as physical humor tied to body language or situational humor deeply linked to plot twists. This narrow scope may result in a partial understanding of the overall humor system in *Friends*.

Theoretical constraints also exist. The study focuses exclusively on Halliday's classic SFL framework, centered on the three metafunctions and Register Theory, and overlooks new developments in functional linguistics, particularly Martin's Appraisal Theory. Appraisal Theory, which focuses on evaluative resources (attitude, engagement, graduation), could offer additional insights into how speakers convey humorous evaluations—for example, the sarcastic attitude in Chandler's self-mockery or the exaggerated graduation in Joey's food obsession. By excluding this perspective, the study misses opportunities to explore the "evaluative layer" of humor, limiting the depth of its analysis.

7.3. Directions for Future Research

To address these limitations and expand the research scope, three promising directions for future study emerge. First, expanding the corpus to include dialogue excerpts from other popular English sitcoms—such as *The Big Bang Theory* or *How I Met Your Mother*—would enable cross-sitcom comparisons. This work could explore whether strategies like "transitivity deviation" are universal humor tools, or if sitcoms with distinct themes (e.g., the science-focused humor of *The Big Bang Theory*) rely on unique functional language choices, shedding light on broader patterns of humorous language in sitcoms.

Integrating Appraisal Theory into SFL analysis represents another valuable path. By combining the three metafunctions with evaluative resources, future research could explore how attitude (e.g., positive or negative stances), engagement (e.g., drawing the audience into humor), and graduation (e.g., strengthening or weakening humor intensity) collaborate with metafunctions to construct humor. This integration would fill the gap in the current study by uncovering the evaluative dimensions of humor that were not fully addressed.

Finally, cross-cultural comparative studies offer a meaningful extension. Selecting representative Chinese sitcoms—such as *Ipartment* or *Love Is Not Blind*—and ana-

lyzing their humor mechanisms through an SFL lens would allow comparisons of functional language choices between English and Chinese sitcoms. For example, it could explore whether cultural values (e.g., collectivism in Chinese culture versus individualism in American culture) lead to differences in register adaptation—like more reserved tenor in Chinese friendly teasing versus more direct tenor in English—or metafunction deviation. Such research would deepen understanding of the cultural embeddedness of humorous language, enriching the broader field of cross-cultural linguistic humor studies.

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