

**“THIS IS A COMMON VIEW PRESENTED IN US TV
PROGRAMS ABOUT PEOPLE FROM THE THIRD
WORLD”: ETHNICITY DISCOURSES IN CHINESE
ONLINE DISCUSSIONS***

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I use the discourse historical approach and Critical Discourse Analysis as the overall framework to examine the ethnicity discourses represented in the popular US situation comedy, *The Big Bang Theory*, and Chinese audience's responses to dialogues involving ethnic issues represented in it. I explore how India and Indians are constructed through discursive strategies in *The Big Bang Theory*, and also how Chinese audience debates the stereotypes and potential discrimination. As Chinese audience members either reproduce or resist the images of Indians portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory*, some become self-reflective in that they not only challenge the biased characterizations of Indians in this sitcom but also discuss how Chinese should position themselves in watching derogatory portrayals of Indians through the lens of US-centered media programs. A discursive feature in Chinese audience's ethnicity discourses is that they are replete with moral judgments as to whether others' perceptions of and attitudes towards Indians meet moral standards or not. The audience's discourses are loaded with moral meanings that overtly communicate (dis)respect for other ethnic groups.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, discourse historical approach, ethnicity discourse, morality, situation comedy

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1. INTRODUCTION

The power of discourse in defining and shaping how people perceive “the other” in real life has been an abiding concern in linguistics, critical discourse studies, sociology, and anthropology. The literature has analyzed discursive patterns of text and talk on issues pertaining to ethnicity, race, multiculturalism, and immigration, and has included everyday conversation and formal institutional talk found in political speeches, the media, and open debates (e.g., see Augoustinos and Every 2007; Blommaert and Verschueren 1998; Rojo 2000; Seidel 1988; van Dijk 1993, 1997; Wodak and van Dijk 2000). In this study, I use both the discourse historical approach (DHA) (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2001; Wodak and Meyer 2009) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to provide an overall framework to examine the ethnicity discourses¹ represented in the popular US situation comedy (hereafter, “sitcom”), *The Big Bang Theory*, and Chinese audience’s responses to the dialogues involving ethnic issues represented in it. Alim and Smitherman (2012:3) note that in American public discourses, “language is often overlooked as one of *the* most important cultural tools that we have for distinguishing ourselves from others.” This holds true for public discourses in Chinese-speaking communities. While intergroup and intragroup ethnicities as well as other social identities are common topics in everyday conversations, little attention has been directed to the language with which we describe, or tell apart, ourselves and others.

This study examines a public online debate concerning the perceived differences of opinion on India and Indians as characterized in *The Big Bang Theory*. Produced by CBS since 2007, this sitcom is about four physicists—Sheldon, Leonard, Howard, and Rajesh—who live in Pasadena, California, and how their eccentric behavior and social awkwardness lead to amusing interactions with “ordinary people,” including Penny, an attractive blonde who works as a waitress. Among these five main characters, Sheldon, Leonard, and Penny are typical

¹ Throughout this paper, I use the term ‘ethnicity discourse’ instead of the more common term ‘racist talk,’ because I leave the decision to the reader as to whether the data under investigation in this study involves discrimination or not. Like the Chinese audience members shown in this analysis, readers may disagree as to what constitutes racist talk.

Caucasian Americans, whereas Howard is Jewish and Rajesh is an Indian from Delhi who speaks with an Indian-English accent. A great proportion of the dialogues and jokes thus pertain to the sociocultural-linguistic stereotypes of Howard and Rajesh. In this study, I focus on season 3, episode 4, in which Rajesh as the main protagonist may lose his job in the United States and be obliged to go back to India, which in his opinion is not a good option for him. I decided to analyze the heated debate among Chinese audience regarding this episode for two reasons. First, the public discussion that takes place in online discussion forums provides a suitable site for scholarly research examining ethnicity discourses. Moreover, although this episode is engaged with making fun of India and Indians, some Chinese audience members become self-reflective to the extent that they not only challenge the biased portrayal of Indians in *The Big Bang Theory* but also discuss how Chinese should position themselves in watching the derogatory portrayals of Indians through the lens of US-centered media programs.

On the basis of a detailed data analysis, this study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) How does *The Big Bang Theory* (season 3, episode 4 in particular) construct images of India and Indians through discursive discourse strategies?
- (2) How do Chinese audience members perceive, deny, or approve the potentially racist humor related to Rajesh? How do they reflect upon comparable representations of Chinese in US media programs?
- (3) What is the moral reasoning behind the mixed opinions held by Chinese audience members regarding the characterizations of India and Indians?

The data included for analysis represent both top-down mass-mediated and bottom-up everyday life approaches to ethnicity discourses. The first set of data comes from dialogues in *The Big Bang Theory*, a US-centered media program. In media programs, perceptions of different ethnicities are often amplified and legitimized, thus offering researchers

a critical perspective through which to interrogate popular assumptions and premises regarding “the other.” The first part of my analysis, therefore, makes transparent the ideological agendas of the sitcom. The second part of my analysis focuses on how Chinese audience debates the stereotypes and potential discrimination represented in *The Big Bang Theory*. The second set of data comprises online discussions among Chinese audience, especially the youth and young adults in China and Taiwan (more details in Section 3 “Data”).

Scholars have observed that in Western societies, explicit forms of prejudice have gradually disappeared because people tend to use less blatant expressions to discuss race and ethnicity (Baker 1981; Bonilla-Silva 2010; Jiwani and Richardson 2011; McConahay 1986). However, this study shows that due to the anonymity afforded by cyberspace, some Chinese audience members employ overt expressions of prejudice and discrimination to describe India and Indians. As Chinese audience members either reproduce or resist the images of Indians portrayed in *The Big Bang Theory*, some members reflect upon how their own positions (i.e., Chinese as another target for derision and prejudice) affect their viewing of other ethnicities in US media programs.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Over the past 20 years, there has been a burgeoning literature on how CDA contributes to the interdisciplinary inquiry of the relationship between language use and discussions of ethnicity and race. Holding that “language [is] a form of social practice” (Fairclough 1989:20), CDA considers the “context of language use to be crucial” (Wodak and Meyer 2009:5) and contextualizes language use within a sociohistorical dynamics. Fairclough (1992:10) argues that every instance of language use has three dimensions: “it is a spoken or written language text; it is an interaction between people involving processes of producing and interpreting the text; and it is a piece of social practice.” CDA has been utilized to unpack the hidden dominance in power relations and ideologies of discourse that are considered taken-for-granted aspects of discourse (van Dijk 1993).

Scholars have examined the discursive strategies and rhetorical devices of the prejudiced ideologies of ‘in-’ and ‘out-’ groups, including in the Netherlands (van Dijk 1984, 1987, 1993, 1997, 2005), the United States (Mehan 1997; Santa Ana 1999), New Zealand (Abel 1996; Wetherell and Potter 1992), France (Van der Valk 2003), and the United Kingdom (Jiwani and Richardson 2011; Jones 2000; Lynn and Lea 2003), and Australia (Augoustinos et al. 1999; Rapley 1998). These studies characterize the qualities of racist, xenophobic discourses in various contexts, and focus on immigrants, asylum seekers, and ethnic minorities as out-groups. Moreover, these studies, apart from providing details of the case studies which were the object of focus in their research, developed methods of analysis of the representation of “the other” in discourse.

Van Dijk (1997), discussing parliamentary debates, argues that politicians and their bureaucracies wield great power in the production of ideologies relating to minority groups, and thus strongly influence the minds of the public at large and the policy making that is shaped by public consensus. In the same vein of political genre, Van der Valk (2003), in examining the discourse on immigration and nationality of the French right-wing parties UDF/RPP, shows that the anti-immigrant discourse had already emerged back in the 90s. Since then, the negative representations of the immigrations have been constantly reproduced in the public discourse of politicians. In another piece of work, Van Dijk (2005) investigates how the mass media and political propaganda promote covert racist talk that becomes a learned and acceptable behavior. He points out that stereotypes and prejudices repeatedly find their places in the media, either blatantly or subtly. While the everyday needs and lives of the minorities are rarely reported, their negative acts, especially in crime-related stories, are emphasized. Likewise, Jiwani and Richardson (2011) explore the ways in which journalists portray minority groups, suggesting that the news comprises inequality and relations of domination with regard to minorities. One commonly used way of achieving the intended effects desired by the dominant mainstream groups is to disguise their racist views of out-groups by drawing the public attention to sensitive issues such as the financial support distributed to out-groups. By doing so, the people who own

socio-economic advantages externalize their views and present their biased opinions as justified and warranted. Augoustinos et al. (1999) also observe that in the public discourses on Indigenous Australians, the focus is usually not on the poor living conditions of Indigenous Australians but on the government support they have received. As the social support given to the Indigenous Australians becomes the main issue, the negative construction of them is easily and collaboratively worked up among the dominant mainstream groups.

This study employs the discourse historical approach (Reisigl and Wodak 2001; Wodak 2001; Wodak and Meyer 2009) to analyze prejudiced discourses against minority out-groups. The DHA proposes five discursive strategies as categories of analysis:

- Referential strategies: How are people named or referred to?
- Predicational strategies: How are people described or characterized?
- Argumentation strategies: How are the attributions, either positive or negative, justified? What is the rationale behind these characterizations (i.e., referential and predicational strategies)?
- Perspectivization: Who is involved in these expressions, and from whose perspectives are these characterizations positioned?
- Intensification/Mitigation: Are any of these characterizations intensified and mitigated?

KhosraviNik (2010:58) suggests that some of these levels are interrelated: “A (fallacious) argument ... may take on the element of intensification/mitigation by a number of choices in the quality of realization of the text, e.g., whether the text is using an implicit or explicit tone, what points are exaggerated or downplayed, whether or not the points are presented overtly or through allusions. The text may also include other perspectivization through modality at all levels, serving the producer’s (potential) strategic goal.” Perspectivization and intensification/mitigation, for example, can take place at all levels of language use. Since KhosraviNik (2010) notes that perspectivization and intensification/mitigation are elements that influence the other three levels of analysis, they are not specifically addressed but only briefly mentioned in passing in this analysis.

3. DATA

The Big Bang Theory is not officially broadcast on television channels in China or Taiwan; however, Chinese audience can watch this sitcom because subtitle groups² translate it and provide Chinese-subtitled versions for free download on the Internet (Hsiao 2014). The wide popularity of *The Big Bang Theory* among the Chinese younger generation is illustrated by the following phenomena. First, several leading subtitle groups (e.g., Fengruan Group, YyEts Group, YDY Group) provide Chinese subtitles for this program. Subtitle groups typically translate the most popular US TV programs and movies; if the programs receive positive responses from Chinese audience, subtitle groups will continue to work on the subtitles for those programs, and more and more groups will follow this trend by offering different versions of the Chinese subtitles. Second, every time an episode of *The Big Bang Theory* is posted on the subtitle groups' websites, the download hits are high and viewers leave messages in online chat rooms to discuss the latest story, the characters' performance, and the Chinese subtitles.

The Chinese-subtitled episode 4 of season 3 of *The Big Bang Theory* was posted on October 13, 2009 by YyEts Group. While many groups have provided Chinese subtitles for this episode, I chose to analyze the subtitles from YyEts Group because they initiated a continuous and

² Volunteer subtitle groups, which emerged in the late 1990s in China, attempt to cater to the thirst for US popular culture among Chinese youth and young adults. The Chinese government grants only a limited importation of US TV programs and movies, however, and censorship practices and officially approved subtitles or dubbing for the few authorized programs typically deprive citizens of the original flavor of the English-language dialogue and US popular culture. The growth of the Internet in urban areas has afforded residents opportunities to circumvent the state-party monopoly on information. Subtitle groups are composed of Chinese youth and young adults of the generation born after the 1980s. With their English proficiency, computer skills, and deployment of social media, volunteer translators add Chinese subtitles to US TV programs and movies, post the shows online for free download, and provide a network for online interactions. Subtitle groups' translations of popular foreign, mostly US, media programs have become an important media outlet for audience members in China, Taiwan, and other overseas Chinese-speaking communities in enabling them to watch the most up-to-date media programs.

lengthy discussion (details in Section 5 “Chinese Audience’s Ethnicity Discourses in Online Discussion Forums”). I narrow the data analysis to cases of where the number of the audience members’ comments exceeded more than 20 replies. The compiled corpus in this study consists of 458 comments found in two media sources: (1) the online discussion forum managed by YyEts Group, which welcomes viewers to discuss all kinds of topics related to *The Big Bang Theory*; and (2) the Paste Bar zone (Tieba) in Baidu, China’s leading search engine. All of the comments respond to the ethnicity discourses on India and Indians represented in this sitcom.

4. MASS-MEDIATED ETHNICITY DISCOURSES IN *THE BIG BANG THEORY*

In season 3, episode 4, Rajesh is facing the risk of possibly losing his job in the US and having to leave the country. He and his friends, Leonard, Howard, Sheldon, and Penny, are brainstorming a solution: (scene: Sheldon and Leonard’s apartment)

- Howard: The bad news is, he [Rajesh] says he’s getting deported.
Leonard: What do you mean, he’s getting deported?
Sheldon: I believe it means that the US Government is going to expel him from the country. He could then either return to his native India, emigrate to another country that’s willing to accept him, or wander the high seas as a stateless pirate. Personally, I’d choose pirate.
Howard: Penny, would you mind stepping outside so we can speak to him?
Penny: Ugh, fine. But the man really needs to work on his girl issues.
Sheldon: Another reason to reconsider a life of piracy. Even today, I understand that’s an all-male profession.
Howard: Okay, she’s gone.
Rajesh: Sorry. I lost my cool.
Leonard: So, what’s going on?

- Rajesh: Okay, here's the deal, six months ago, my research testing the predicted composition of trans-Neptunian objects ran into a dead end.
- Howard: So?
- Rajesh: So, my visa's only good as long as I'm employed at the university, and when they find out I've got squat, they're going to cut me off. By the way, when I say squat, I mean diddly-squat. I wish I had squat.
- Leonard: So, wait what have you been doing for the past six months?
- Rajesh: You know, checking email, updating my Facebook status, messing up Wikipedia entries. Hey, did you know Netflix lets you stream movies on your computer now?
- Sheldon: And you've continued to take the university's money under false pretenses? Highly unethical for an astrophysicist. Although practically mandatory for a pirate.
- Rajesh: I don't want to go back to India. It's hot and loud, and there's so many people. You have no idea, they're everywhere.
- Howard: Okay, guys, think, how do we keep Raj in the country? (new scene in the university cafeteria)
- Rajesh: Oh, beef, I'm going to miss you so much. Do you know, at the Mumbai McDonald's, you can't get a Big Mac? All you can get is a Chicken Maharaja Mac. And the special sauce, curry, which, in India, believe me, is really not that special.
- Leonard: Don't worry, you'll find another job.
- Rajesh: Yeah, let me start practicing for it. Do you want fries with that Maharaja Mac?

This exchange reveals how predication strategies are used as part of the characters' narratives of India. Predication strategies focus on the process of ascribing qualities through which people are characterized. These strategies aim at labeling social actors either deprecatorily or appreciatively. In Reisigl and Wodak's words (2001:54), predication strategies concern "the very basic process and result of linguistically assigning qualities to persons, animals, objects, events, actions and social phenomena." In this dialogue, no character explicitly states that India is

the worst choice for Rajesh; however, Rajesh and Sheldon are forthright in asserting that messiness, bad weather (*It's hot and loud*), crowdedness (*There's so many people. You have no idea, they're everywhere*), and food taboos (*Do you know, at the Mumbai McDonald's, you can't get a Big Mac?*) are typically experienced as part of the life in India. These selected features construct India as undesirable, repugnant, and less developed. The utterance, *you have no idea*, intensifies the implication that India is not a friendly place to reside in and that the situation is beyond the imagination of Americans. Rajesh's accounts and anecdotes of India are self-denigratory and self-effacing; in his construction of India, the place is inferior to the United States, where he currently resides. While Leonard offers encouraging words that he will find another job, Rajesh mocks this hope by pretending that the "job" he will get in India will be simply working at the counter in a MacDonald's in Mumbai (*Yeah, let me start practicing for it. Do you want fries with that Maharaja Mac?*). Compared to his occupation in the United States, as an astrophysicist, Rajesh downgrades India to the status of an intellectual vacuum where professional people like him will end up with jobs that mostly comprise manual labor.

Moreover, Rajesh, an Indian himself, is portrayed as mindless, ignorant (*So, wait what have you [Rajesh] been doing for the past six months?*), unethical (*you've [Rajesh] continued to take the university's money under false pretenses?*), moody (*I [Rajesh] lost my cool.*), and engaged with trivial things (e.g., checking email) that have contributed nothing to helping him resolve his problems about his visa over the past six months as he waited until the need to address the problem became imminent.

There is a subtext to Sheldon's comments on Rajesh's three options: Going back to India is a worse choice than being a stateless pirate or relocating in another country. Such misrepresentation downgrades India to being something less organized than pirate groups. Furthermore, speaking of Rajesh's pretenses that he has been making progress on research, Sheldon implies that Rajesh has failed to be an astrophysicist as his behavior is *highly unethical for an astrophysicist*. Rather, Rajesh has the potential to be a pirate because cheating is *practically mandatory for a pirate*. The contrast between Rajesh's failure to perform the duties

expected of an astrophysicist and his “aptitude” for piratehood becomes a rhetorical move in Sheldon’s comments, characterizing Rajesh as less professional than an astrophysicist should be.

The whole dialogue affords the audience a tangible sense of native authenticity—who can know India better than Rajesh who comes from there? The argumentation strategy is that this negative presentation is warranted by Rajesh, a character with firsthand and authoritative knowledge about India. As Biling (1991) observes, racial prejudice is often criticized as being founded on irrational and poorly reasoned views. *The Big Bang Theory* contrives to let Rajesh’s negative evaluation of India be credited to his own ethnicity, which further reinforces the image that Rajesh, or any Indian, is mindless and does not favor India.

5. CHINESE AUDIENCE’S ETHNICITY DISCOURSES IN ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

Following the exchange analyzed above, Sheldon, who is a researcher at a university, decides to offer a research assistant position to Rajesh to solve his potential visa and deportation problems. In the following exchange, Sheldon and Rajesh are working together on a theory of physics. They are arguing about the theory, and Rajesh feels disadvantaged because he is overwhelmed by Sheldon’s fluency in English regardless of the validity of his argument:

(scene: Sheldon’s office)

Rajesh: No, no, no! That rate is much too low for what we’d expect from this collision. Do you understand that we’re talking about dark matter colliding in outer space?

Sheldon: Of course I understand. And who are you to tell me about outer space?

Rajesh: I’m the astrophysicist. ‘Astro’ means space.

Sheldon: ‘Astro’ means star.

Rajesh: Okay, let me just tell you, if we were having this argument in my native language, I’d be kicking your butt!

Sheldon: English is your native language.

Rajesh: Okay, you got me there, but you're wrong about this!

Chinese audience's discussion begins with the Chinese translation of the two utterances: *Okay, let me just tell you, if we were having this argument in my native language, I'd be kicking your butt!*, and *English is your native language*. The two utterances are accompanied by canned laughter, a sound track added to sitcoms used to imply that viewers are expected to laugh. The Chinese subtitles for the two utterances provided by YyEts Group are:

Rajesh: 如果这会儿我是在用母语和你争论，你绝对说不过我。

Sheldon: 英语就是你的母语。

Viewer Dreamqiyi posted an article³ on the YyEts Group website on October 14, 2009, commenting that the Chinese subtitles are not funny at all, and that he or she did not understand why viewers should laugh.⁴ Dreamqiyi also pointed out that the Chinese subtitles are inaccurate because English is not an official language in India, suggesting that *native language* should be translated into *fangyan* (方言), "dialect," rather than *myu* (母语), "native language."

Dreamqiyi's article initiated a long discussion, which has undergone several topic changes. As Meyers (2012) notices, a prominent feature in online communication is that late comments are sometimes on the topics which are quite different from earlier ones because commenters can digress from any point in the preceding messages. The original issue regarding the translation is replaced with the greater concern on Rajesh's socio-economic background in India, the caste system in India, the

³ Chinese audience members compose their posts in different writing systems: mostly in simplified Chinese and a few in traditional Chinese. I present the data in the original writing system adopted by the authors.

⁴ The humor in Sheldon's reply, "English is your native language," derives from his exposure of the inadequacy of Rajesh's excuse for being at a disadvantage in the argument—that is, Rajesh comes from a rich family in India, where English is the native language for upper-class and wealthy people. This implicit background has been highlighted in *The Big Bang Theory*. Knowing this information and the relationship between class and language in India provides a crucial context for understanding their conversation and the intended humor.

language landscapes in India, the relationship between language use and social class, and education in India. These topics further lead to the issues of how Chinese think about Indians and compare the constructions of Indians and Chinese in US media programs. As shown in the following analysis, the first several posts in this discussion thread comment on how India and Indians are characterized in *The Big Bang Theory*, and the later posts switch the focus to how *we*, i.e., Chinese citizens as well as audience of *The Big Bang Theory*, think about *them*, i.e., Indians, as presented in *The Big Bang Theory*.

5.1 The Language of Prejudice

Different from the aforementioned observation that overt racist discourses are rare in public, in online discussion forums, breaches of the norms of etiquette and polite discourse are frequent due to anonymity:

- (1) AlienAlly (October 16, 2010):

只想说明一件事, 那就是他们 11 亿印度人裡面大约有 10 亿是不算人的, 注意, 我不是在开玩笑, 我们很难想像那裡的情形, 他们的确很可怜, Rajesh 是少数的少数, 开开玩笑无妨

I only want to make a point. Of the 1.1 billion Indians, about one billion are not counted as human beings. Be careful: I am not kidding. It is hard for us to imagine what is going on there. They are indeed in a miserable situation. Rajesh represents an atypical example in India. It is fine to poke fun at him.

- (2) Brake (January 17, 2010):

印度人的确不多人讲英文, 除非从小家裡有钱或者到国外留学. 印度的社会还是很原始落后的, 常常看到印度发生妇女被脱光游街示众, 公开妇孺买卖, 性交易, 合法乱伦之类的问题

There are indeed only a small number of English speakers in India. Indians do not have opportunity to learn English unless they come from rich families or study abroad. Indian society is still underdeveloped and backward. Women are stripped and shown on the streets; women and children are publicly sold for making money; prostitution is common; incest is legal.

(3) New_moon (February 2, 2010):

我觉得这个笑点没有别的意思,就是一种美国人对印度有钱人的观点, Raj 家 4 个佣人, 老爸开的是 Bentley, 当然是上层社会, 也会说英语, 但他吵架吵不赢别人就说英文不是他的母语, 是有些无知吧, 这就是美剧裡看待第三世界国家人民的普遍方式

I do not think this joke implies something else (such as discrimination). It simply reflects how Americans think about rich Indians. Raj's family has four maids, and his father drives a Bentley. He is definitely from an upper-class family and certainly speaks English. However, as long as he cannot win the debate, he claims that English is not his native language. He is ignorant, and this is a common view presented in US TV programs about people from the third world.

In comment (1), viewer AlienAlly uses the generalizing predication, *of the 1.1 billion Indians, about one billion*, to generalize “in a leveling manner to a whole group of persons” (Reisigl and Wodak 2001:57). AlienAlly also utilizes a predication strategy to deprive Indians of their entitlement to the status of human beings and to characterize these Indians as *not counted as human beings*. While literature has documented the various ways by which out-group actors are negatively portrayed (see Augoustinos and Every 2007; van der Valk 2003), it is rare that people use such severe, harsh, and excessive words to exclude them. In comment (2), viewer Brake employs predication strategies to represent India, and such strategy is achieved through reference to “crimes,” including the humiliating and inhuman treatment of women and children and the legitimization of incest. These descriptions associate India with criminality, immorality, degradation, and violence. These negative topics become the core defining qualities of Indian society. It is also implied that Indians are used to these conditions, because India is *still* in such a state. Speaking English is thus a “marked” ability, *unless* the individual exists under one of the two unusual circumstances: being rich or studying abroad. The ability to speak English is implied to be atypical and unusual in India, a society where most people still struggle to live with the prevalence of crime in their lives. In comment (3), viewer New_moon uses *people from the third*

world to describe Rajesh and other Indians. This referential strategy is a form of overt discrimination as this term denotes a *perspectivization* from the first-world countries. Implying a dominant value judgment that some countries and citizens are better than the others, this term, *the third world*, obscures all of the particularities of various types of conditions of human lives in different cultures and societies.

5.2 The Denial of Prejudice

One of the pervasive features of contemporary ethnicity or race discourses is the denial of prejudice (van Dijk 1992). Prefaces such as “I am not a racist but...” or “I have nothing against immigrants but...” are added to negative evaluations of other ethnic groups. These strategies utilize positive self-presentations that are flouted by the authors’ true intentions. Disclaimers save the faces of those who make racist remarks with the hope of avoiding criticism. Such disclaimers legitimize the dominant groups and voices, and delegitimize the minority groups and their voices.

The above comment (3) reveals the disclaimer, i.e., transfer, which means that people attribute certain points of view to the majority in the wider community (Billing 1991) in order to “project an image of rationality, objectivity, and fairness” (Kleiner 1998:206). Viewer New_moon contends that the joke (i.e., what is Rajesh’s native language?) involves nothing else but *simply reflects how Americans think about rich Indians*. Predicational strategy is used to corroborate the point that Rajesh is a rich Indian: *Raj’s family has four maids, and his father drives a Bentley*. These “factual” claims support the view that *The Big Bang Theory* does nothing wrong by presenting jokes about Rajesh’s identity issues: his good background allows him to speak as good English as native speakers do; but when he cannot win the debate, he uses the excuse that English is not his native language. Further, New_moon claims that his or her view of Indians *is a common view presented in US TV programs about people from the third world*. Consensus warrant helps to build the facticity of this potentially racist comment and protects the individual who holds this view from the criticism of having expressed racism.

Comment (04) illustrates another type of disclaimer, apparent denial, which means that the first proposition is negated by disclaimer:

(4) GreenTea (November 17, 2009):

我对印度人没有偏见,但是印度说英语的人少,有很大一部分原因是因为等级制度,种姓人是得不到教育资格的,穷,又惨,怎麼可能说英语

I have nothing against Indians, but the reason that there is only a small number of English speakers in India is because of the caste system. Low-caste people are not qualified for education. They are poor and miserable. How could they possibly speak English?

While people may disagree as to whether the description of low-caste people as *poor* and *miserable* is prejudiced, viewer GreenTea preemptively employs a denial of the possibility of this accusation and constructs a positive self-presentation by framing his or her comment with the statement, *I have nothing against Indians, but....*

Still another type of disclaimer is apparent empathy. In the aforementioned comment (1), the legitimization of the joke on Rajesh is enacted through apparent empathy, in which an appeal to the emotions is involved. The statement, *of the 1.1 billion Indians, about one billion are not counted as human beings*, is sensational and controversial. To show how serious this statement is, viewer AlienAlly employs a metalinguistic stance, *be careful: I am not kidding*, to convey the positive self-presentation that he or she is serious about this strong claim. Moreover, the viewer empathizes with these people by saying *they are indeed in a miserable situation*. Because describing “the other” as not even counted as humans is liable to be considered a racist, the viewer works up his or her moral identity as being not racist.

6. MORAL ARGUMENTATIONS IN CHINESE AUDIENCE'S ONLINE DISCOURSES

The online discussion regarding the line, *English is your native language*, includes two major components: audience members' comments on socio-linguistic issues in India, and audience members' evaluations of each others' comments. A discursive feature in these ethnicity discourses is that they are rife with moral judgments formed by Chinese audience as to whether others' perceptions of and attitudes towards Indians or other ethnic groups meet moral standards or not. The audience's discourses are loaded with moral meanings that overtly communicate (dis)respect for other ethnic groups. In this study, morality is defined as a culturally specific set of communicative forms in which moral actions are realized.

Chinese audience's discourses reveal different types of moral argumentations, that is, arguments that aim to justify claims and statements through conventional moral reasoning. Two forms of moral argumentation have been found in the data. The first type of reasoning considers moral norms as rigid rules. In other words, this argumentation does not take any special context into consideration, thus it does not allow any room for negotiation in terms of moral norms. The following comments show that some audience members call for the unquestioned moral norm whereby showing respect to other ethnic groups is equivalent to showing respect to your group and yourself:

(5) Carrot (December 15, 2009):

每次看到美剧中的亚洲角色, 我实在不知该作何感想. 他们把印度人弄得挺蠢的, Rajesh 还是受过高等教育的印度人. 我这个中国人看了尚且如此, 真不知道其它国家的人看了会怎麼想

I do not know what to think about the Asian characters in US TV programs. They (the programs) present Indians as stupid and foolish, not to mention that Rajesh is already a well-educated Indian. Even I, as a Chinese, do not feel comfortable (with the stereotypes imposed upon Rajesh). I do not dare to think how (audiences in) the other countries think.

(6) Tato (January 21, 2010):

不知道為啥老有人說別的國家破爛，其實印度也沒我們傳言的那麼破爛，至少我去玩的時候旅遊區維護的很好。沒辦法，美國也這麼講我們，他們難道比我們好很多嗎？

I do not know why some people always criticize other countries. India is actually not underdeveloped as people say. At least when I travelled there, the sightseeing areas are well-maintained. There is no way to correct this misunderstanding (i.e., India is underdeveloped). The US treats us in the same way (as we treat India). Are they (Americans) really better than we are?

(7) Heaven (October 22, 2009):

我不想和我的印度朋友确认这个问题，因为根本没必要问。我只想说，请对别人好一点，尤其是你不认识的人。有些人的发言反应了中国失败的教育。这种人和其它中国人是不同的，别丢人现眼了

I do not want to confirm this question (i.e., whether English is an official language in India) with my Indian friends because there is no point in bringing up this post to them. All I want to say is please be nice to people, especially those you don't know. Some comments reflect the failure of Chinese education. The people (who make the inappropriate comments about Indians) are different from the other Chinese people. Don't make a fool of yourself.

(8) Imender (February 18, 2010):

想到美劇中常常出現對中國人的誤解，讓我覺得我們對印度人應該也很可能有相當程度的誤解。即便《貧民窟的百萬富翁》這種片子，我們也可以看出幾十年前的貧民窟現在也逐漸被高層住宅區代替…階級歧視慢慢消失，至少那種遠離賤民的傳統肯定是沒了的

Like the common misconception of Chinese people in US TV programs, I think we pretty much have the same misconception of Indians. From movies like *Slumdog Millionaire*, we can tell their slums have been replaced by high-quality residential areas. Caste discrimination is fading away. At least the practice of staying away from low-caste people is gone for sure.

(9) Cherish (March 3, 2010):

没必要藉着美剧给别人说三道四, 美国人怎么看印度人, 你就怎么接受吗? 美国人对中国的负面呈现特多, 你也都接受吗?

There is no need to make irresponsible remarks about other people. Do you accept all the American-centered views on Indians? Chinese are always negatively represented in US TV programs. Do you also accept those views?

These viewers emphasize that being fair to Indians (and other ethnic groups) and remaining critical about American-centered perspectives is the right attitude to have when people watch US TV programs, especially those that contain biased portrayals of different ethnic groups. Comment (5) stresses empathy among Asian viewers regarding how Asian characters are depicted. Comment (6) remarks that those Chinese who belittle Indians suffer from the ethnocentrism themselves. Criticizing other ethnical groups without evidence reproduces ethnic stereotypes that are often very different from reality. Comment (6) also uses empirical experience of travelling in India to counter anti-Indian stereotypes. Comment (7) points out that *being nice to people* is an essential moral rule to uphold, and it reflects one's background and character. Comment (7) employs an imperative and blaming tone toward those who look down on Indians. According to this moral stance, how one thinks about others reflects one's own level of education. Those who have biased and unfriendly thoughts about Indians are separate from the more cultured and educated Chinese. Comment (8) makes an analogy between the misrepresentation of Chinese and of that of Indians in US media programs. The popular movie *Slumdog Millionaire* is used to establish the validity of a positive and progressive version of Indian society that is different from the negative account rooted in US media programs. Comment (9) challenges those who are not sensitive to the ethnic stereotypes presented in US TV programs. Rhetorical questions (*Do you accept all the American-centered views on Indians? Chinese are always negatively represented in US TV programs. Do you also accept those views?*) are used to underscore the moral rule that viewers should be critical about and alert to American-centered points of view. Bergmann (1998) observes that a primary resource for behaving,

reflecting on, or expressing opinions about something in terms of right or wrong is vocabulary. In comment (9), the phrase *making irresponsible remarks* and the rhetorical questions carry strongly evaluative tones, blaming those who accept American-centered opinions as lacking critical thinking and only following the commonplace yet tendentious constructions of out-group actors.

This moral argumentation objects to ethnic prejudice in any context, even in sitcoms, and it maintains that tolerance and fairness are unquestioned norms that people should adhere to in their relations with other ethnic groups. Audience members who conform to this moral norm take a discursive stance in their comments by constructing different ways of being Chinese. A contrasting structure is the “we/they” and “I/you” rhetoric, which can be regarded as a “distinction” strategy (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). While earlier studies have shown it is common to use personal pronouns as a referential strategy of distinguishing *we* from *they*, what is intriguing in the data is that audience members engage in multilayered positioning of self and others. First, the Chinese (*we*) stand apart from Americans (*they*) who always make negative other-presentations (*They present Indians as stupid and foolish* [5]; *The US treats us in the same way [as we treat India]. Are they [Americans] really better than we are?* [6]). Second, an educated Chinese (*I*) who challenges American views of Indians is divided from a Chinese (*you*) who embraces those views (*I do not know why some people always criticize other countries* [6]; *The people [who make the inappropriate comments on Indians] are different from the other Chinese people* [7]; *Do you accept all the American-centered views on Indians? ... Do you also accept those views?* [9]). Irvine and Gal (2000:38) define fractal recursivity, a semiotic process in language ideologies and linguistic differentiation, as “the projection of an opposition, salient at some level or relationship, onto some other level. For example, intra-group oppositions might be projected outward onto intergroup relations, or vice versa.” To comment on individual distinctions in terms of their (dis)respect for other ethnic groups, opposition is discursively produced in Chinese audience’s discussion: the opposition between the negative constructions of Chinese in US media programs and the reality is iconically mapped onto the asymmetry between the unfavorable

constructions of Indians in US media programs and the reality. This opposition is projected again onto how Chinese reflect upon Indians while their misunderstanding differs from the reality. Through fractal recursivity, India and Indians become symbols in the construction of well-educated and moral Chinese who have an unbiased view of “the other.” Talking about “the other” outside of the audience’s sociocultural community creates another “other” within their own community.

The second type of moral argumentation takes particular contexts into consideration and allows moral negotiation in certain special cases. The Chinese audience members who employ this argumentation adjust moral norms by applying them to the particularities of media programs, especially sitcoms. Moral norms can thus be subject to other purposes such as humorous and entertaining effects:

(10) Nonfire 119 (October 23, 2009):

美国电影都可以拿总统开玩笑，说了个印度人又如何，他们也常说中国人怎么样，本来就没有打算放给这些国家的人看，我想美国人看到也不会认真

American movies joke about their own presidents. What harm would it cause to joke about Indians? They (Americans) also often make fun of Chinese. So what? Indians or Chinese are not the target audiences for these programs. I do not think US audience takes them (the jokes) seriously.

(11) Pidy (May 3, 2010):

歧視不歧視說不好，有偏見是肯定的，不過顯然是當做笑點的，不必過份認真

It is hard to judge whether (TBBT) has discrimination (on Indians). There must be prejudice to some degree, but obviously for humorous effect. Don’t be so serious about it.

(12) Forever (February 14, 2010):

美剧中以偏见为笑料非常频繁，老爸老妈浪漫史严重歧视加拿大人，也经常表露出对纽约以外的美国人的歧视，老友记裡经常拿爱尔兰人开玩笑，但这些国家的观众都没有说觉得被伤害了

It is very common that humor in US TV programs centers on prejudice. *How I Met Your Mother* discriminates against Canadians as well as Americans outside of New York. *Friends* often jokes about Irish people. None of the people from these countries claim to feel hurt.

Comment (10) suggests that people should not be too serious about jokes in US media programs because Americans even mock their own presidents. In other words, jokes, whether ethnically related or not, should be allowed if they take place in media programs such as sitcoms. It is also implied that compared to US presidents, the position of Indians is just a trivial subject for fun (*What harm would it cause to joke about Indians?*). Furthermore, comment (10) claims that as long as the ethnic groups being made fun of do not watch the program, the jokes do not count as ethnic or racist jokes. Comment (11) suggests that although the joke about Rajesh's native language involves prejudice, it is not real prejudice because it exerts humorous effects. This comment reveals another disclaimer, apparent concession, which means that a speaker shows respect to an idea but then rejects it. Viewer Pidy acknowledges prejudice, yet it is negotiated immediately by the next proposition (*There must be prejudice to some degree, but obviously for humorous effect*). Likewise, comment (12) emphasizes that the joke about Rajesh's native language is contextualized in a sitcom, a genre that mitigates discrimination and prejudice. Viewer Forever cites warrants for the legitimacy of this joke from other US sitcoms and the other ethnic groups that are often teased.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this article, I have examined how India and Indians are constructed in *The Big Bang Theory* and in Chinese audience's online discussions. I have also discussed the audience members' moral argumentations regarding their stance towards the ethnic joke potentially involving discrimination and prejudice. As Chinese audience members disagree on whether the joke surrounding Rajesh's language and identity

involves discrimination, their language and the logic by which they debate the joke produce fractal recursivity: the first-order division is *we* as Chinese versus *they* as Americans; the second-order division is *I* as a well-educated Chinese who have critical viewpoints on ethnicity discourse in US media programs versus *you* as an unkind Chinese who accept and reproduce the negative views of Indians constructed in US media programs. Talking about other ethnic groups thus becomes a reflective practice by which audience members reflect upon their own position in watching how “the other” is represented in US media programs.

Several micro- and macro-social factors are at play in Chinese audience’s online discussions. The anonymity in cyberspace presents a challenge to the scholarly view that racism is tactically and covertly communicated. This analysis shows that some audience members go on record and use overt descriptions to label India and Indians with the use of negative concepts, including crime, non-humaness, and the third world. As described in Rodriguez and Clair’s study of bathroom graffiti (1999:2), anonymity can act to “level the playing field by getting past all of the factors—such as social status, hierarchical position, education, access, familiarity with rules, expertise, communication competence.” Writing in the open online environment is essentially a social act. Anyone who reads the discussion can participate in the conversation. Web-hosted spaces have become a new and culturally significant mode, providing an alternative to consider how ethnicity discourses are formulated by different communities of practice.

Ethnicity discourses presented in sitcoms are considered playful or unserious by some Chinese audience members. Humorous effects mitigate the potential discrimination and prejudice, thus legitimizing racial ideologies and distinctions. The sitcom as a genre creates a grey area regarding what constitutes harmful discrimination, and allows for the negotiation of different values that can be attached to ethnicity-based jokes. In a study on how novice comedians are taught to produce racist jokes in a funny and lighthearted manner, Perez (2013) notes that stand-up comedy is becoming a crucial site where the shifting racial discourse is normalized. As people think an ethnic joke is “just a joke,” US sitcoms, with the advent of cultural globalization and the predominance of US

popular culture, may strategically enforce stereotypes on audiences all over the world and engage them uncritically in the propagation of these stereotypes.

Chinese audience's online discussions reveal different moral reasoning of how to position self in relation to the negatively presented others. Although morality is not thematized in the audience's ethnicity discourses, it lurks under the surface of the discursive strategies and sometimes is rather strongly implicated in the audience members' attitudes and displayed in their language. Some members are critically aware that commenting on other ethnic groups is a moral business related to one's own decency. As the overall goal of CDA is to illuminate social problems through investigation of everyday discourse, this study shows how linguistic structures, rhetorical arguments, and moral reasoning collaborate to construct versions and accounts of intergroup relations that may have discriminatory consequences.

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「這就是美劇看待第三世界國家人民的方式」：
中文觀眾之網路族群話語分析

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本文以歷史論述分析及批判論述分析為研究方法，分析美國情境喜劇 The Big Bang Theory 和中文觀眾(大多數為中國網民，少數為台灣網民)對此節目中關於族群議題之論述及呈現。本文探討該節目如何使用頻次顯著的語言結構以凸顯印度及印度人，以及中文觀眾如何在網路空間討論該節目所呈現之印度及印度人的刻板印象。本文發現，中文觀眾或者複製、或者抵抗該節目之觀點。有些觀眾不僅批判該節目視印度人為他者的論述，更進一步討論中文觀眾在觀看美國節目時該如何反思印度人或者其它種族——包括華人——在美國流行影視節目中的偏頗形象及潛在種族歧視。觀眾的言談形成道德論述，即對美國觀點所呈現之印度人的回應反應了觀眾是否具有批判思考的能力和對其它種族的尊重。

關鍵字：批判論述分析、歷史論述分析、族群論述、道德、情境喜劇