A Study of the Humor Aspect of English Puns: Views from the Relevance Theory[*]

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Abstract—**A distinctive rhetorical device, puns are wittily applied in advertisements, daily conversations, riddles, etc. Formed by the combination in certain contexts with polysemic or homophonic words, puns naturally lead to more than one interpretation in an actual communication. Puns have many different functions in utterances as well. In this paper Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory is used to analyze how the humor effects of puns are constructed. In the process of comprehending a pun, the audience decodes the communicator's ostensive utterance in its a context. If the context contradicts the usual interpretation, the audience rebuilds a new assumption with their encyclopedic knowledge, logical and lexical information, and deduces the real implication of the utterance—and appreciates the great humor effects of English puns.**

Index Terms—**English puns, Relevance Theory, contextual effect, humor effect**

I. INTRODUCTION

The pun, the short form of paronomasia, has a long history in the West as well as in China. One of the most ancient rhetorical devices, it has multi-functional effects, such as making the language briefer or more humorous. As a special language device, puns enhance the appeal of a language and strengthen its informative effect; and English puns have many different functions, such as providing brevity, humor, satire, and persuasion. Widely used in many fields, such as literature, advertising, and funny riddles, puns have penetrated almost every aspect in our lives, and have thus attracted the attention of more and more scholars in various fields.

Being an effective rhetorical device, English pun is a common language phenomenon. For the puns in English, they are formed by combing certain contexts with the homophone, polysemy of words, or homophonic words so that two meanings are given birth to at the same time, i.e., surface meaning and deep meaning, which will naturally lead to more than one interpretation for the actual communication. And the pun has many different functions, such as brevity, humor, satire, persuasion, forming riddles and so on. The Relevance Theory developed by Sperber and Wilson in 1986 is the foundation of cognitive pragmatics. The core issue of Relevance Theory is communication and recognition. In the views of this theory, there is always be a rule for cognition, namely, to understand the world according to related information.

This paper uses Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory to analyze how the humor effect of pun is constructed. According to Relevance Theory, in the process of understanding a pun, audience decodes what the communicator's ostensive utterance is and constructs the first contextual assumption, so audience would get a context effect. If the context contradicts the broad context, audience would rebuild a new assumption with their encyclopedic knowledge, logical information, and lexical information, and deduce the real implication of the utterance. Then audience would get the humor effect of English pun. After the analysis, there are some applications of humor pun in our life. From this paper, people would learn how to appreciate a humor pun, and would have greater interests in English.

II. PUNS

A. Definitions of the Term Pun

To understand the nature of a pun, it is helpful to look at its various definitions. According to The Webster's Third International Dictionary, a pun can be defined as "a humorous use of a word in such a way as to suggest different meanings or applications, or of words having the same or nearly the same sound but different meanings: a play on words." The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines a pun as "an amusing use of a word or phrase that has two or more different meanings which is called polysemy or of words with the same sound and spelling but different meanings which is called homonymy." The Collins English Dictionary defines a pun as the "use of words that have more than one meaning, or words that have the same sound but different meanings, so that what you say has two different meanings and makes people laugh." The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language says it is, "A play on words, sometimes on different senses of the same word or sometimes on the similar or the same sound of different words. Also calls paronomasia." The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as, "The use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different association, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly

the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect." A pun is a figure of speech which consists of a deliberate confusion of similar words or phrases for rhetorical effect, whether humorous or serious. A pun can rely on the assumed equivalency of multiple similar words (homonymy), of different shades of meaning of one word (polysemy), or of a literal meaning with a metaphor. Bad puns are often considered to be cheesy. Walter Redfern (1984) succinctly said: "To pun is to treat homonyms as synonyms".

These various definitions of a pun also have certain understandings in common. First, a pun is a play of words. That is to say, a pun always uses words that have the same sound or similar pronunciation, or a word that has two or more interpretations. Second, a pun is a kind of rhetorical device that produces certain language effects, especially humor. It can be noticed from the definitions above that a pun is defined as "a humorous use of a word," "an amusing use of a word or phrase," "a use of words that make people laugh," "the use of a word so as to produce a humorous effect." Punning, therefore, challenges us to make good use of possible pressure syllable of language, and it amazes us by deliberately violating the law of nature which pretends two things that can not convey the same place at the same time.

Generally speaking, punning, one of the rhetorical devices which are widely used in English, makes language become more concise, funny, humorous, novel, and so on, and it will leave a deep impression on readers with readability and humor.

B.   A Brief Review of Studies on Puns

Because of the popularity of pun used in languages, many scholars have studied it from different perspective in various fields, such as rhetoric, semantic, pragmatic and cognitive perspective. The pun is one of the most popularly used and studied figures of speech. Some scholars, such as Louis G. Lippman, Kristine Bennington, and Ivan Laars Sucharski use Tom Swifties (ridiculous adverbial puns) to analyze the humor function and flexibility of language in relation to its context. Zhang Hongyu and Li Yan (2003), Mao Fasheng (2003), Zhao Yongguan (2002), have all studied English puns from the perspectives of their rhetorical classification, properties, and rhetorical functions. From the perspective of semantics, Chen Xing (1996) analyzed the functions of puns in funny riddles. Peng Jiayu & Yu Shaopiing (2001) and Tan Wenfen, have also studied puns semantically, and in their papers, they discussed the ambiguity of a pun, noting how its two meanings shapes a pun. Some scholars, such as Zhao Aiping (2002), Sun Weiwen (2008), Li Yang (2010), Shi Xiaowen (2011), and Meng Xianjie (2010) have examined puns from the perspective of pragmatics, noting their appearance in advertising, literature, and riddles. Zhao Ming (2011) wrote emphasizing the beauty of both the form and contents of puns. Some scholars, such as Lin Yan (2011), Ai Lin and Li Yufeng (2009), and Lin Tingting (2010) have studied the puns in English movies. In the year 1984, Red fern illustrated that pun is a highly economic tool in discourse and it's a "labor-saving" (1984, Redfern).

On the basis of the Relevance Theory, Tanaka(1994) is one of the most influential scholars who studied how the audience achieve establish optimal relevance by means of attracting the potential audience's attention on the basis of the Relevance Theory. While these scholars have examined English puns from the perspectives of rhetoric, semantics, and pragmatics and noted their humor, Sperber & Willson's Relevance Theory provides new information, as noted in the following section of this paper, about how puns achieve humor, which is, indeed, the main function of English puns. It's no doubt that punning, as a special linguistic device for communication, it is very attractive and can convey much more information efficiently.

III.   THE HUMOROUS EFFECT OF PUNS: THE RELEVANCE THEORY

A.   The Relevance Theory

In 1986, Sperber and Wilson introduced the Relevance Theory for the first time in their book Relevance: Communication and Cognition. According to them, following Grice's Conversational Principle, relevance governs the communication process. In light of Relevance Theory, communication is a process that proceeds under certain cognitive inferences. It is relevance-oriented; that is to say, human beings pay attention to the things more relevant to them rather than others. If for example, while reading or listening to a speaker or program, people will pay attention only if they think the information is valuable. In ostensive-inferential communication, the speaker produces an ostensive stimulus that creates a presumption of optimal relevance; however, the audience will process and interpret the speaker's utterance only in line with what is relevant to them.

Sperber and Wilson hold the opinion that relevance principle applies to ostensive-inferential communication. That's to say, in order to guarantee a successful communication, the first step is that the communicator must catch the addressee's attention. The most important feature of ostensive communication lies in its guaranteeing the relevance. Sperber & Wilson think that relevance is the cognitive key to successful communication. To understand an utterance, there are two demands: a. having enough contextual effect to attract audience; b. enabling the audience to understand the contextual effect with a reasonable amount of effort. Further, to achieve optimal relevance, the utterance must be set in a clear enough context so that audience can readily reach the desired interpretation. If the audience cannot understand the context, they will not interpret the utterance correctly; thus the relevance principle has been negated. However, if an audience makes an extra effort to understand the context, they may arrive at the intention of the utterance. That is to say, additional effort may generate additional contextual understanding. Hence to understand an English pun and appreciate its humor, one may need to put in extra effort to understand its context.

The essence of the Relevance Theory is the cognitive activity. It suggests that the cognitive activity is a referential process during communicating. Additionally, it explains the audiences' inference effort of the communicators' intended meaning.

B.   An Analysis of the Humor of English Puns

While communicating, according to Relevance Theory, communicators rely on certain context, process of which is a psychological construct and a set of assumptions in mind, to convey their intention and purpose. These assumptions, definitely play a leading role in the processing of understanding utterances. In the puns' communication process, the audience decode the communicator's ostensive utterance first and construct their first contextual assumptions. But when they sense a contradiction in contexts and with their own encyclopedia information, lexical information and logical information build a new contextual assumption, they can then deduce the real implication of the utterance.

According to the Principle of Relevance Theory, understanding the humor of puns requires extra effort because the communicator uses an ambiguous contextual assumption deliberately. Thus the audience cannot readily see the context. The humor is illustrated in the following examples.

(1) Customer: "Waiter, will the pancakes be long?"
    Waiter: "No, sir. Round."
(2) Smiles is the longest word in the world.

Obviously, in the first dialogue, we can infer that the waiter's contextual assumption contradicts our encyclopedic knowledge. And to get the contextual result that the customer wants, we have to abandon the waiter's contextual assumption of shape, and look for lexical information and logical information. We then discover that long can also refer to time, a new contextual assumption: the customer was asking how long he would need to wait, but the waiter gave an answer that was totally unrelated. Though we need pay extra effort to understand it, we get the humor in the end.

In the second example, smiles cannot be the longest word in the world. But to get the contextual effects the addressor desired, we have to take full advantage of our encyclopedic knowledge, lexical information and logical information. Through that, we discover that smiles can be divided into three parts: s—mile—s. From the series of logical inference, we can construct a new contextual assumption: in smiles, there is a mile away between the first letter and the last letter. That is why it is the longest word in the world. Eventually we get the contextual effect—the humor.

IV.   The Application of Pun's Humor

Sperber and Wilson suggest that successful communication relies on the audience's recovery of the intended interpretation. As is mentioned above, Relevance Theory can supply the most comprehensive account of utterance interpretation. In the interpretation of puns, extra processing effort first holds the addressees' attention and makes them strengthen their memory. According to Relevance Theory, extra effort means extra effect. During the decoding process of puns, most often great humor will be generated simultaneously. Punning, the indirectness of utterance demanding some extra effort in decoding, can achieve additional effects in communication, such advertisements, conversation, riddles, and so on. During the decoding process of puns, most often great humor will be generated simultaneously.

A.   In Advertising

Advertising is a non-personal communication of information usually paid for and persuasive in nature about products, service or ideas by identified sponsors through the various media. Advertising, a special and effective tool to persuade consumers to buy advertised products or services, has become a part of our daily life. In the process of creating advertisements, advertisers value the power and flexibility of language with distinctive skills to catch consumers' attention. In order to enhance the appeal of an advertisement, advertisers pay much attention to the choice of words and phrases. Puns, as one of the rhetorical devices, are frequently and widely applied in commercials. Take the following two pieces of advertisement, for example:

(1) We know **eggsactly** what you want.

At first glance, people may not get its meaning. Then changing their cognitive environment and using their encyclopedia knowledge, logical and lexical information, they are likely to build a new contextual assumption. This is an advertisement for eggs, and the word eggsactly sounds like exactly. The advertisement conveys the meaning since customers seek for the best quality and least expensive goods, these eggs are exactly what they want. Therefore, after changing their cognitive environment, people can figure out the meaning of this commercial. Undoubtedly this is a smart way to attract people's attention and impress them deeply by the transformation in spelling of the word eggsactly.

In addition, many "brand name puns" are used in ads as well. The advertiser makes the brand name act as a part of the ad and plays upon it. Certainly it is a useful way to inform the audience about the special characteristic(s) of the brand. Another advantage of brand name puns is that the advertiser makes the audience connect the brand with the advertiser's selling ideas, for example:

(2) You will go nuts for the nuts of the Nux.

This is an advertisement for nuts. In it, nuts in go nuts and the nuts have the same pronunciation, while Nux has a different spelling, but a similar pronunciation. The three, actually, refer to different things respectively. The first nuts collocates with go, which means that something can send somebody out of his mind — in a good way this time. The last

Nux refers to a brand name for nuts. The nuts, in the middle, however, mean the literal nuts of Nux brand. The three words used in this concisely structured sentence form a pun. Reading it, we will be attracted by its repetition of the key words and will appreciate the humor and smart way of advertising. Let's take a look at the following one:

(3) More sun and air for your son and heir.

In an impressive way, this commercial makes customers be aware of the great significance of the living in a clean environment and keeping good health. Undoubtedly, for the smart use of the two pairs of words "sun" and "son", "air" and "heir", which are easy for customers to read and remember, this advertisement is a big success.

B.   In Conversation

Puns also function as effective devices to express our meaning. While communicating with others, people sometimes may not say something directly when they want to comfort or criticize somebody. Instead they turn to puns for help. Puns, which are applied in a humorous way, interestingly make our utterances more impressive under some circumstances. And sometimes a pun can have both a humorous contextual effect and an ironic effect as well. Take the following one, for example:

(1) *A: Here are a few views of our hotel for you to take with you, sir.*
    B: Thanks, but I have my own views of your hotel.

This is a conversation that happened between a housekeeper and a guest. In their dialogue, one word is used twice, views. As mentioned above, the process of grasping the contextual effect is, in fact, the process of the continuously selecting and adjusting the contextual assumptions. In this cited example, the views that A referred to meant postcards of the scenery around the hotel. However, if we comprehend what B said, he had his own view the hotel -- obviously this contradicts our encyclopedic information. Thus we should rebuild a contextual assumption with our lexical information to discover that view has another meaning--opinions about things. We can then infer that actually the guest may not be very satisfied with that hotel; he has his own opinions of the hotel. The humor here is clearly ironic.

More funny examples:

(2) A Professor tapped on his desk and shouted, "Gentlemen, order!"
    The entire class yelled, "Beer!"

(3) You're not eating your fish." A waitress said to a customer in a restaurant. "Any thing wrong with it?"
    "Long time no sea. (see)

(4) A little boy came up to his mother. "Ma", he said, "I have some to tell you. My teacher kissed me."
    "Well, were you and good boy and did you kiss her back?"
    "Of course not"! He denied indignantly. "I kissed her face"!

The following are another example of pun used humorously. One day a customer told the waitress that he would like to have some concubines --- he meant to say cucumbers, but his vocabulary was limited. The waitress seemed to know what he meant, but she sake, "Dressed or undressed?" Obviously in the 3 conversations happened in classroom and the restaurants, the students and the waitresses are punning on purpose to achieve amusement and fun. In example (4), the little boy interpreted the word "back" literally. Hence great humor appeared and the naïve image of a kid was depicted.

C.   In Riddles

Puns are subtle form of word play. It involves the technique of similar sounding words and alternative meanings of the same words. Besides, it requires more subtle and sophisticated language skills than most humor forms. Humorous puns are very popular in riddles in English through the use of homophones, polysemy of words, homophonic words, or sometimes the idioms. For example, the riddle of trick question often uses a pun in setup, the story line, or more often, the punch line. For example, in the following riddle, one person asks, "What's black and white and red all over the world?" The other person usually cannot answer the riddle, so says, "I give up. What's the answer?" The riddler replies, "A newspaper." This is an obvious answer if one knows that "red" is pronounced the same as "read" in English, but the meaning is clearly different.

Take these examples.

(1) *A: When does the baker follow his trade?*
    B: Whenever he kneads the dough.

This example uses both homophone and polysemy of words to construct the pun. In B's answer, there are two words--*kneads* and *dough,* which are the keys to comprehend this pun. First, *kneads* has the same pronunciation as *needs*, while *dough* has two meanings--an informal term for money and a fairly firm mixture of flower and water. These two words produce the humorous puns that convey two meanings differently.

a. Whenever the baker is going the necessary step to make bread;
b. Whenever the baker needs some money.

Hence a humorous effect is achieved successfully.

(2) *A: What weather do mice most dislike?*
    B: When it's raining cats and dogs.

In English, most idioms cannot be understood literally. To get the contextual effect of this riddle, we have to know that the idiom *rain cats and dogs* means rain very heavily. Then let's get back to the question, the kind of weather mice most dislike. When faced with such a question, we may feel puzzled and unable to answer it. Unexpectedly, the answer

is in this conversation: *When it's raining cats and dogs.* That is to say, mice most dislike a rainy day. But why? To comprehend this, we refer to our language knowledge and figure out that the literal meaning of *raining cats and dogs* means cats and dogs—the enemies of mice dropping from the sky!

V. CONCLUSION

Generally speaking, a pun is a form of word play. It's true that in some cases the initial meaning of the pun is either rejected or just helping to obtain additional contextual effects that speaker intends. Sperber & Wilson's Relevance Theory has been used here to analyze the ways audiences comprehend the humor of puns. It's claimed that relevance is compatible with human psychology. Sperber and Wilson define relevance as a combined function of effort and effects, which is also mentioned as achieving the optimal relevance. The whole comprehension process is one of searching for the optimal relevance. According to Relevance Theory, audiences will cognitively select and adjust their contextual assumptions as they listen to an utterance. In the process of comprehending puns, when a contextual assumption contradicts the big context, the audience has to abandon their first understanding and rebuild a new one according to their encyclopedia knowledge, lexical, and logical information. With that extra effort they can decode and arrive at the intended context.

As one of the rhetorical devices, the pun plays an important role in languages, shines with the luster of wisdom, adding color to language, and its main characteristic is humor. English puns have special English characteristics because of their backgrounds in history, literature, and politics. Whether puns appear in advertisements, daily conversations, or riddles, they attract and delight their audience. It is hoped that this paper will encourage an increasingly large number of people to use and study humorous puns. In addition, English learners may strengthen their English comprehension and enjoyment.

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