

Functions of Pragmatic Ambiguity on the English Joke

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Abstract

It can be easily observed that the joke is the most obvious humorous genre appearing in people's daily life in English-speaking countries. The joke in these countries can be called the English joke, which is a typical western culture. In the English joke, the humorous words or remarks are frequently employed by those who have the ability to make use of language flexibly. Pragmatic ambiguity exists in the English joke and performs functions on it. This paper analyzes what functions pragmatic ambiguity performs on the English joke and what effects can achieve by means of pragmatic ambiguity.

Key words: the English joke; humorous; pragmatic ambiguity; pragmatic competence; function.

1. Introduction

As a common phenomenon occurring in language, ambiguity exists in every language. Whenever people read books, write down papers, talk with each other and watch TV programs, they more often than not run into some ambiguous sentences or utterances, which have different functions in various contexts. Pragmatic ambiguity is one kind of ambiguity. In this paper, I just put pragmatic ambiguity under the English environment. To be more specific, I relate pragmatic ambiguity to the English joke, which can be considered as one of highly ambiguous forms of natural communication. I have observed that the interesting results of

word-to-word translating from English into Chinese in *Jin Shan Yiqiao*, one of mechanical translating tools on the Internet, might be partly triggered by pragmatic ambiguity, for computers or some other automatic systems simply could not yet understand natural language in the given contexts. In this sense, we should pay more attention to some ambiguous forms of natural communication, such as the quip and the English joke, etc. Notice how the English joke often depends on pragmatic ambiguity. We are often led down the “garden path” to one meaning, and in the end we are wrong all along. Such effects are exerted through pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke. In other words, pragmatic ambiguity brings into play on it.

2. The definition of pragmatic ambiguity

2.1 The definition of ambiguity

In a broad sense, ambiguity is defined by Qiu Shude (1998) as one kind of typical relation between language structural forms and their meanings. The same language structural form that has more than one meaning results in ambiguity. This definition is characteristic with being abstract and conceptual. The structural form contains the word, the phrase, the sentence, the discourse and the utterance, while the meaning not only refers to conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collocative meaning and thematic meaning (G. Leech, 1974, Hu Zhuanglin, 2001), but also the meaning in use. The latter is part of the researching field of pragmatics. Debonliger defines ambiguity as a D-structure sentence corresponding to two or more S-structure sentences (Chi Yufeng, 2003). Briefly speaking, ambiguity indicates that although one word, one phrase or one sentence is grammatically correct, misunderstandings of them still appear from the angles of meanings and structures.

2.1 The definition of pragmatic ambiguity

Ambiguity can be classified from different standards and perspectives. According to Qiu Shude, there are four kinds of ambiguity with regard to branches of language. The first one is word-formation ambiguity which mainly touches on the internal structures of compounds and derivational words and the indefinite semantic relations among themselves. For example, the compound “unlockable” which is in the sentence “The door is unlockable” has two meanings. Analyzed from its own structure or formation, one is “unlock+able” and the other is

“un+lockable”. The first one means being able to unlock the door, while the second one means being unable to lock the door. The second one is phonetic ambiguity which deals with ambiguity aroused by suprasegmental features of language such as, the stress, the tone, the intonation and the pitch, etc. For example, the phrase “an French teacher” refers to two meanings, which are respectively a teacher teaching French and a teacher from France. The two meanings are distinguished from each other. The third one is semantic ambiguity which states that ambiguity is drawn forth by way of the transforming of lexical meanings and the involving of semantic relations among the sentence formation. Take one sentence “Have you finished the book?” for example, we can not understand the distinctive meaning of the word “finished” in this sentence, for it may mean finishing writing or reading the book.

The fourth one is pragmatic ambiguity. According to Qiu Shude, pragmatic ambiguity refers to the kind of ambiguity which turns up in language use. This kind of ambiguity occurs under the pragmatic environment. As we all know, pragmatics is defined as the study of how speakers of a language use sentences to effect successful communication (Dai Weidong, 2002). The pragmatic ambiguity is brought about if the speaker employs the vague and indefinite language to express several meanings or forces simultaneously to the hearer (Chi Yufeng, 2003). It is composed of five aspects, including the ambiguity of the conversation, the speech act, the reference, the implicature and the presupposition. The indefinite and vague language is ambiguous. So do the humorous words and remarks used in the English joke.

3 Functions of pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke

3.1 The English joke and pragmatic ambiguity

It is well known that the joke is one kind of humorous genres, which indicate typical categories of humor such as jokes and quips that have clear discourse patterns, according to Xu Lixin. The joke is included in humor. Humor is a pervasive human phenomenon, observable in many spheres and aspects of life, in various human interactions and especially in jokes and humorous styles (Xu Lixin, 2003). A popular definition treats humor as the attributes of an event that make us laugh. To Palmer (1994:3, Xu Lixin 2003), humor is everything that is actually or potentially funny and humor is also the processes by which this “funniness” occurs. *Encyclopedia* in English version defines humor as a joke, a remark and a

story that concludes with a comical surprise twist or punch time. Humor is often expressed and applied by means of allusions, ironies, puns and rhetorical devices, etc. Thus, as one kind of humor, the joke is also expressed in the same way. In a broad sense, the term “joke” has been used in the literature as an alternative term for all genres that are meant purely to convey humor and naturally excluding discourses. In a narrow sense, “joke” refers to the story-type humorous genre (Xu Lixin, 2003). This paper mainly talks about the joke, especially the English jokes which have special pragmatic functions through ambiguity. The English joke is prone to have the ambiguity of implicature, which is one of pragmatic ambiguity. When Grice posited the cooperative principle, the term implicature was coined. Based on the theory of implicature ambiguity among pragmatic ambiguity, I infer that implicature ambiguity on the English joke has different functions and get special effects through the violation of the cooperative principles. However, implicature ambiguity is not the only pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke. In addition, other types of pragmatic ambiguity also contribute to some effects on the English joke. In the next part I will analyze functions of pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke in details.

3.2 The analyses of functions of pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke

The English joke is the typical genre of humor. It has pragmatic ambiguity as well as other humorous genres. In this part, I take the English joke to analyze how pragmatic ambiguity emerges and what functions it possesses. It is necessary to notice that the form of English joke is often the conversation. There are several examples for me to analyze the functions of pragmatic ambiguity on them in the following.

(1) The recreational function

Pragmatic ambiguity plays an important part in making the English joke entertaining and amusing. There is one example to show the recreational function of pragmatic ambiguity by way of the violation of relation maxim in the cooperative principle.

Joke Example 1:

A: I have invented a new drug which could kill lice effectively.

B: That’s wonderful. How is it used?

A: When you catch a louse, just put a little of that drug on its mouth and it will die

immediately.

This is a joke in which pragmatic ambiguity elaborate its role through the violation of relation maxim. In the majority of situations, English jokes are related to the violation of relation maxim. The speaker A replies to B by an unexpected answer. In B's utterance, "used" has two meanings. Due to the transforming of lexical meanings, there seems to be semantic ambiguity. However, the transforming of meanings of the word "used" takes place in a given context relating to the usage. Thus, it belongs to pragmatic ambiguity, which makes language jocular and humorous and which can entertain speakers. It is called the recreational function of pragmatic ambiguity.

Another example shows that referential ambiguity on the English joke can also perform the recreational function.

Joke Example 2:

(The waiter supported three drunken guests with his hands to go towards the taxi.)

A: Please send the left one to the airport, the middle one to the subway and the right one to the bus station.

(Half an hour later, the taxi driver came back)

B: On the way to the airport, I braked suddenly and the three were thrown together. Can you tell me who they are, exactly?

The ambiguity of this joke lies in the different references. The speaker A only provides somewhat indefinite references for the driver, such as the left one, the middle and the right one. Along with the unstable situation, the references also have to be changed. In this example, the speaker B cannot distinguish references varying in the changing context. That the reference is not clear becomes the major source of the humor. The function of ambiguity here is also to supply the absolute joy to people.

(2) The social function

Besides the pure sheer which pragmatic ambiguity provides, there is another fundamental function of pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke. It is the social function. I expound it by analyzing one example.

Joke Example 3:

A: My daughter has arranged a little piece for piano.

B: Good, it's about time we had a little peace.

In this example, pragmatic ambiguity acts by violating the manner maxim. As a matter of fact, the speaker B doesn't want to listen to the piano. Because the words "piece" and "peace" have the same transcription, the speaker B mishears "piece" for "peace". Pragmatic ambiguity exists in this situation, resulting from not avoiding obscurity of expressions. In the speaker B's heart, he is tired of listening to the piano. But he does not want to say it directly for it may hurt the feelings of the mother and her daughter. Mishearing of these two words really helps him. He skillfully expressed his true feelings about the piano playing and avoids offending others by creating a joke through pragmatic ambiguity.

Another example further shows how pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke performs the social function.

Joke Example 4:

On the morning of her birthday, a woman told her husband, "I just dreamed that you gave me a diamond necklace. What do you think it means?"

"Maybe you'll find out tonight," he said.

That evening, the man came home with a small package and gave it to his wife. She ripped off the wrapping paper and found a book titled *The Meaning of Dreams*.

In this example, pragmatic ambiguity acts by the husband ignoring the implicature of his wife. When his wife told her husband about the dream of giving her a diamond necklace, she implied that her husband should buy it for her by saying "What do you think it means?" By doing so, she expressed what she really means and at the same time would not be embarrassed if her husband did not buy it because she did not ask it directly. His husband understood what his wife meant but could not fulfill his wife's wishes. He did not want to refuse his wife directly so that he chose to ignore his wife's implicature by employing the literal meaning of his wife's words. Therefore, he bought her a book titled *The Meaning of Dreams* to help his wife to illustrate what her dream meant. In this way, he saved her wife's face and saved himself money by not offending each other directly. Therefore, this sort of pragmatic ambiguity attains a practical and social effect. It is reflected in the social function.

(3) The aesthetic function

Another function of pragmatic ambiguity is the aesthetic function. According to Liu Changyuan, aesthetics is one branch of philosophy dealing with the principles of beauty and artistic taste. In the English joke, implicit and ambiguous expressions are used to reach a particular veiled effect, to fulfill the speaker's intention and to deliver a sense of beauty. In this sense, this function falls into the domain of aesthetics. In some literary works, some conversations can be also considered as jokes in the broad sense. These kind of English jokes can be expressed by the ambiguity of presupposition as follows.

Joke Example 5:

In *Pride and Prejudice* (Austin. J, 1995, Qiu Shude, 1998)

A: ...She ought to give over thinking of her own beauty.

B: In such cases, a woman has not often much beauty to think of.

The two "think of" have different kinds of presupposition. The speaker A thinks of herself to be rather good-looking, while the speaker B thinks that A actually is not very beautiful. The switching of the meaning is determined by the different presuppositions, suggesting a special implicature and achieving implicit but jocular effects, in terms of the aesthetic function of the pragmatic ambiguity.

(4) The emphasizing function.

Some figures of speech can be applied in some English jokes to produce pragmatic ambiguity so that these jokes possess some implicature. One of functions that this rhetorical ambiguity performs is the emphasizing function. I take one example to parse it.

Joke Example 6:

In G.B.Shaw's *Pygmalion*

Liza: Not a bit...and always more agreeable when he had a drop in.

One rhetorical device "understatement" is employed here. This utterance has two opposite meanings. It sounds ambiguous. On the one hand, from literal meaning, Liza's father doesn't drink too much wine. On the other hand, her father is in fact a heavy drunkard. Factually, the function of "understatement" is to emphasize the latter meaning by expressing it too weakly.

(5) The satirizing function

This satirizing function also lies in rhetorical ambiguity. In the English joke, we can perceive that some jokes are characteristic with being irony and satirical. Originally, these jokes convey fairly good meanings. However, they must be understood in a given context. They may carry some contrary meanings. There is one such example.

Joke Example 7:

A: I do look nice in the picture, don't I?

B: Well, Madam, the answer lies in the negative.

The speaker A is a rich woman. She is in the photo studio now. The speaker B uses the word "negative" to satirize her by means of a pun. The original meaning of "Negative" is the photographic plate. Another meaning of it is opposite to "positive". Using a pun artistically can receive humorous and ironic effects. In other words, the rhetorical ambiguity on this English joke has the satirizing function.

Another pragmatic ambiguity caused by the ambiguous reference also helps the English joke to have a satirizing effect.

Joke Example 8:

A couple are sitting in their living room, sipping wine. Out of the blue, the wife says, "I love you."

"Is that you or the wine talking?" asks the husband.

"It's me," says the wife. "Talking to the wine."

The ambiguity comes from the uncertain reference of "I" and "you" of the sentence "I love you." When the husband heard his wife said the sentence—"I love you.", he doubted that his wife really meant that she loved him. So he purposely asked his wife the question "Is that you or the wine talking?" in order to ridicule his wife. His wife fought back by saying that she was talking to the wine which implies that I love wine instead of you. Therefore, in the sentence "I love you.", "I" can have two references— the wife and the wine and "you" can have two references— the husband and the wine. The couple uses the ambiguity of the reference to mock each other. Thus, pragmatic ambiguity could assist to form the English joke which has satirizing function.

4. Conclusion

Ambiguity in language can be classified to four kinds. Among them, pragmatic ambiguity receives the maximum attention of ambiguity researchers. This paper discusses about pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke. Various functions of pragmatic ambiguity can be found and identified in this kind of joke. Analyzing from some examples of the variety of English jokes, we infer that pragmatic ambiguity has the recreational function to entertain people, the social function to make people's wishes come true, the aesthetic function to express implicit meaning, the emphasizing function to lay stress on something or some points and even the satirizing function to satirize somebody or something. After we recognize these functions of pragmatic ambiguity on the humor, especially English jokes, we are enabled to capitalize on our pragmatic competence of employing language in a flexible way to fulfill our goals and reach our intentions.

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