A Cognitive-Pragmatic Study of English Puns and Chinese *Shuangguan*

英汉双关的认知语用研究

艾琳◎著

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Preface

Puns are word plays in which different meanings are exploited from linguistic expressions. For example, Mercutio's dying words in *Romeo and Juliet* (III. i. 98), "Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man", contain a pun, which plays on the word "grave". In the context in which it is used, "a grave man" may mean either "a man in a somber mood" or "a man in a grave". It is believed that Shakespeare used about 3,000 puns, and used them to great effect.

As puns are humorous use of language, they have been the object of humor research for a long time. In fact, as Attardo (1994: 108) points out, "puns were seen as the only legitimate field for the interdisciplinary contacts between linguistics and humor studies", and "it is fair to say that the subject of puns is the area of humor research in which linguistics has traditionally been most active". The linguistic study of puns can trace its origins back to the Greeks, and the influence of Plato and Aristotle on the theory of humor is still strongly felt in the modern development of humor research.

However, despite the widespread use of puns and the considerable amount of literature accumulated in the study of puns, their precise nature remains rather elusive. For one thing, the pun is a major type of humor, and yet according to Attardo (1994: 3), "it is impossible to define 'a priori' the category of humor". To complicate matters further, puns in different languages may take different forms, serve different purposes and highlight different aspects of humor. Therefore, it poses a big challenge for anyone who wishes to propose a universal definition of the pun and conduct a contrastive study of puns in two different languages. It is precisely this kind of challenge that Dr. Ai Lin takes up in this monograph *A Cognitive-Pragmatic Study of English Puns and Chinese Shuangguan*.

Drawing on the prototype theory, the author first makes a distinction between the prototypical and non-prototypical uses of both English puns and Chinese *shuangguan*, and on the basis of this distinction she proposes a unified working definition for the puns in both English and Chinese. Then, by using this definition as the criterion, she collected 100 English puns from 43 episodes in the American talk show *Larry King Live* and 102 Chinese puns from 70 episodes in four Chinese talk show programs. And finally, based on a detailed analysis of the three types of puns in the data, namely, the transparent puns, the semitransparent puns and the opaque puns, she provides a unified account of the processing of puns in both Chinese and English and suggested three different procedures of pun processing for the three types of puns. She has argued, convincingly in my view, that pun interpretation largely consists of two phases: (1) an initial phase of meaning activation, which is mainly guided by the graded salience principle; and (2) a contextual integration phase, which is primarily governed by the principle of relevance to determine whether an activated meaning should be retained as relevant or rejected as irrelevant. Indeed, as Attardo (2008: 106) has remarked, "contextual relevance enhances the perception of humorousness in puns".

The originality of Dr. Ai Lin's study in this book lies in the detailed explication of the linguistic, functional and pragmatic

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features of different puns in Chinese and English, the careful comparison of puns in the two languages, and the systematic exploration of the processes of the interpretation of puns. It makes a useful contribution to the field of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural study of puns. I am sure that readers will find it both interesting and informative.

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October 31, 2011

Foreword

This book is intended to provide a unified account for the processing of both English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective.

In order to ensure the validity of the study, a brief comparison between English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* is carried out on the basis of the prototype theory at the outset of the book. After a thorough investigation of the prototypical and non-prototypical uses of both English puns and Chinese *shuangguan*, it is revealed that the category of English puns and the category of Chinese *shuangguan* are similar but not identical. With regard to the differences between these two categories, they are formed around different prototypes. As far as the category of English puns is concerned, the prototypes include the pun signaled by only one explicit hinge but activating multiple different meanings as well as the pun signaled by two or more explicit hinges and conveying two or more different meanings. In contrast, prototypical Chinese *shuangguan* is signaled by only one explicit hinge but activating two different meanings. In other words, the *shuangguan* signaled by one explicit hinge but activating more than two different meanings and the *shuangguan* signaled by two explicit hinges and communicating two different meanings are both considered as non-prototypical members in the category of Chinese *shuangguan*. Moreover, while the English pun signaled by more than two explicit hinges and communicating more than two different meanings is considered to be prototypical, it seems that the category of Chinese *shuangguan* does not allow the same case to happen. Therefore, partly because English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* are not equivalents, partly because this book aims to investigate the processing of puns and *shuangguan* as a whole, a unified working definition for the puns in both English and Chinese under the present investigation is proposed. More specifically, the pun in the current study is defined as an intentional use of a hinge to activate two different meanings, or of two hinges with similar phonological and/or graphological form to convey two different meanings.

In accordance with this definition, 100 English puns and 102 Chinese puns are collected from five talk show programs. On the basis of the number of hinges and the transparency of the double meanings, these 202 puns are then classified into three categories, namely, transparent puns, semi-transparent puns and opaque puns. To put it clearer, a transparent pun is characterized by two explicit hinges which are similar in phonological and/or graphological form, but convey two different meanings. A semitransparent pun is characterized by only one explicit hinge from which both a salient meaning and a less salient meaning are derived. An opaque pun is characterized by only one explicit hinge which conveys a salient meaning directly and calls up a phonologically similar implicit hinge, thus conveying an implicated meaning indirectly.

The bulk of this book is devoted to a detailed analysis of pun processing, which brings about the following three major findings. First, our analysis of pun interpretation confirms a basic hypothesis, that is, the initial phase of discourse interpretation is mainly guided by the graded salience principle while the second, contextual integration phase of discourse interpretation is mostly governed by the principle of relevance. In other words, the graded salience hypothesis will have predictions as far as the meaning activation is concerned. When it comes to the determination of the intended meanings of a pun, the principle of relevance will play an important role in deciding whether an activated meaning should be retained as relevant or rejected as irrelevant. Second, our data analysis shows that different types of puns, namely, transparent puns, semitransparent puns and opaque puns, require slightly different processing procedures. A two-step procedure for processing a transparent pun, a three-step procedure for processing a semitransparent pun, and a four-step procedure for processing an opaque pun are respectively proposed. Although it is hard to say that the processing of an opaque pun is always more difficult than that of a semitransparent pun, it is obvious that the processing of a transparent pun is always easier than that of a semitransparent pun or an opaque pun. Third, our data analysis further reveals that hinges and contexts are two important factors which exert influence on pun processing. On the one hand, the more detectable the hinges of a pun are, the easier the pun processing will be. There is no denying that a transparent pun is very easy to be processed because it boasts two explicit hinges. However, in the case of an opaque pun, if the implicit hinge is closely related to the explicit hinge and can be evoked immediately, its processing will not be very difficult either. On the other hand, the more accessible the supportive contexts become, the easier the pun processing will be. Accessible and sufficient contextual cues can make great contribution to the processing of all the three types of puns, though the processing of semitransparent puns or opaque puns is believed to be more heavily dependent on contexts than that of transparent puns.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 A general description of English puns and Chinese *shuangguan*

As a rhetorical device and a communicative strategy, English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* are used widely in both literature and daily life and have gradually received more and more scholarly attention. While at present both of them are held in great esteem in their respective language system, they, historically speaking, have undergone very different fates. Unlike Chinese *shuangguan*, which have always enjoyed a good reputation traditionally, English puns have experienced ups and downs and have been considered as a very controversial linguistic phenomenon. For instance, Lionel Duisit depreciated puns as the "least literary" of figures of speech and Dryden condemned puns as "the lowest and most groveling kind of wit" (Redfern, 1984: 4). However, whether puns were cursed as a traitor to language or blessed as a welcome guest in the past, they have nowadays developed into a socially-acceptable phenomenon as well as a universal phenomenon. Like it or not, puns have become an important topic in the linguistic research and the study of puns is believed to be of momentous and far-reaching significance. As Heller (1974: 271) claimed, "The structure of the pun holds implications basic to an understanding of many psychological problems, and a knowledge of its dynamic processes offers important insights into the nature of reasoning itself. "

For a long time, English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* have been considered as equivalents. It is admitted that English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* do have a lot in common, but they are actually not identical. The origin of the English word " pun " is unascertained. Best guesses concentrate on the possible relationship between pun and puntiglio. According to the explanation of *Oxford English Dictionary*, the words " might originally be an abbreviation of the Italian puntiglio, small or fine point, formerly also a cavil or quibble ... a pun being akin to a quibble; and pundigrion might perhaps be a perversion, illiterate or humorous, of puntiglio" (Bates, 1999: 421). Although the etymology of the word "pun" is still highly dubious so far, the definitions of English puns raised by various scholars seem to be definite and similar to a great extent. Take *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* as an example. It defines puns as "the humorous use of a word to suggest different meanings, or of words of the same sound and different meanings. " (Fowler, 2000: 1110)

When it comes to the Chinese word *shuangguan*, it is said that this term was first put forward by Fan Zhongyan(范仲淹), a famous Chinese scholar of Northern Song Dynasty. More specifically, *Ci Yuan*(《辞源》)(马国强,1998:40) raises the possibility that the Chinese word *shuangguan* might originate from Fan Zhongyan's Preface to *Fu Lin Heng Jian* (《〈赋林衡鉴〉序》), in which Fan claimed that *jian ming er wu zhe, wei zhi shuang guan*(兼明二物者，谓之双关), i. e., those which refer to two things simultaneously are called *shuangguan*. Although the etymology of *shuangguan* is not as contentious as that of "pun", the definitions of Chinese *shuangguan* seem to be a bit troublesome. It is generally agreed that Chinese *shuangguan* refers to two signifieds for one signifier, but Chinese scholars can not reach a consensus about the range of the signifier. Formerly, quite a few Chinese scholars maintain that *shuangguan* only occur at the level of "word". Nevertheless, with the deepening of the study, some contemporary Chinese scholars such as Ni Baoyuan (1980), Wang Xijie (1993), Zhong Jiuying (2002) have improved the original definitions by pointing out that the range of linguistic phenomena involved in Chinese *shuangguan* can actually exceed the word both in the direction of smaller, simpler units (e. g. morpheme) and in the direction of larger units (e. g. phrase, sentence, sentence group, paragraph, etc.).

From this sketchy description of their respective historical status, etymology and definitions, it follows that English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* are more or less different. Admittedly, however, in terms of pragmatic functions, English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* do bear some similarities. Generally speaking, the outstanding functions both of them are able to fulfill can be summarized under the following three headings: exhibiting economy, creating humor and achieving indirectness.

First, puns and *shuangguan* can convey double meanings in a single linguistic manifestation, so they are very helpful in attaining the goal of economy. Leech (1983: 67) has claimed that, if one can shorten the text while keeping the message unimpaired, this reduces the amount of time and effort involved both in encoding and in decoding. It goes without saying that both English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* are capable of living up to this principle of economy by bringing two signifieds for the price of one signifier. The economy of English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* can be seen from two perspectives. On the one hand, two disparate strings of thought can be expressed concurrently by means of only one linguistic manifestation, which is undoubtedly labor-saving. On the other hand, one and the same linguistic manifestation is filled unexpectedly and simultaneously with two different meanings, thus increasing the density of meaning. It can be said without exaggeration that both English puns and Chinese *shuangguan* are a perfect combination of economy in expression and richness in meaning. To taste the pleasure of killing two birds with one stone, let us look at the following example:

(1) (context: When teaching in China Public School, Shen Congwen fell in love with his student, Zhang Zhaohe. Although later he was transferred to Qingdao to teach in Shandong University, he still went out of his way to visit Zhang Zhaohe in Suzhou in a summer vacation. As a lady from an eminent cultured family, Zhang Zhaohe felt so shy that she was reluctant to meet Shen Congwen. But Zhang Yunhe, her elder sister, persuaded her to invite Shen Congwen to their family and provided various opportunities to promote mutual understanding between Shen Congwen and their family. After a four-year-long pursuit, Shen Congwen was finally accepted by Zhang Zhaohe and her father. Learning of this news, Zhang Yunhe immediately volunteered to send a telegram to Shen Congwen. However, the whole telegram consisted of only one Chinese character, that is, Yun.)

允 (盛若菁,2002:39)

This Chinese character alone constitutes a Chinese *shuangguan*, which ties together two unrelated meanings. The highly salient meaning of the word "允" is permission, so the first reading of "允" in this context refers to the fact that Zhang Zhaohe's father had permitted the association between his daughter and Shen Congwen. On the other hand, "允" happens to coincide with the middle name of Zhang Yunhe, so the second reading of "允" can be Zhang Yunhe. In other words, this Chinese *shuangguan*, on being unpacked, yields two different messages, one referring to the text of the telegram and the other standing for the signature of the sender. After reading this telegram, one can not help exclaiming, "How economical this *shuangguan* is!"

Second, both puns and *shuangguan* are perhaps the most common form of humorous expression. While both of them can serve the humorous purpose, English puns seem to play a more active role in the production of humor than Chinese *shuangguan*. It can be easily seen from the definitions of English puns that the prominent purpose of using puns is for the sake of humorous effects. As a matter of fact, many English puns are indeed the power-unit that drives, and that has always driven, the lifeboat of English humor. For illustration, let us borrow one example from Francisco Yus:

> (2) A guy wanted to go for a walk but it looked like rain, so he held his hand out the window to see if it was indeed raining. As he held his hand out, a glass eyeball fell into it. He stuck his head out the window and looked up to see a beautiful woman looking at him with one squinty eye from the apartment above. "I'm sorry!" she exclaimed, "If you return that to me, I'll cook you a nice dinner for your trouble." He

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