

Ambiguity in English Joke: A Pragmatic Perspective¹

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ABSTRACT

The joke is the most overtly hilarious genre that one may notice in people's daily lives in English-speaking nations. The joke is known as the "English joke" in these nations and is representative of western culture. Those who have the capacity to utilize language flexibly typically use the hilarious phrases or remarks in English jokes. The English joke has pragmatic ambiguity, which serves functions on it. This essay examines the roles that pragmatic ambiguity plays in the English joke and the results that it might produce. Humorous language is a common way to communicate humor in modern society. Puns and ambiguity are crucial humor-producing techniques in language. . Additionally, they actively assist others in achieving effective communication outcomes, which endows them with unique pragmatic traits. The pragmatic properties of ambiguity and puns in English comedy are examined in this study work. It begins by defining and categorizing ambiguity and puns before fully examining the pragmatic elements of English comedy, including the Deixis, the Presupposition, the Cooperative Principle, and the Relevance theory.

Keywords: *English joke; humorous; pragmatic ambiguity; pragmatic competence; function.*

INTRODUCTION

Ambiguity is a frequent linguistic phenomena that appears in all languages. When individuals read books, write papers, converse with one another, or watch TV, they frequently come across ambiguous statements or utterances that serve diverse purposes depending on the context. One type of ambiguity is pragmatic ambiguity. I just categorized pragmatic ambiguity as part of the English environment in my essay. To be more precise, I associate pragmatic ambiguity with the English joke, which is regarded as one of the most complex types of informal speech. I have observed that Pragmatic ambiguity may have contributed to the intriguing results of word-to-word translation from English to Chinese in Jin Shan Yiqiao, one of the online tools for mechanical translation. At the time, computers and other automatic systems simply could not comprehend natural language in the contexts in question. In this regard, we ought to give some ambiguous natural communication styles, such the quip and the English joke, greater consideration. The English joke frequently relies on pragmatic ambiguity, as you can see. We are frequently taken down the "garden path" to one interpretation, only to discover that we were all along in the wrong. Such consequences are brought about by the English joke's pragmatic ambiguity. Or to put it another way, pragmatic ambiguity affects it.

THE DEFINITION OF AMBIGUITY

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 falls under the purview of pragmatics research. According to Debonliger (Chi Yufeng, 2003), ambiguity is when a D-structure

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sentence corresponds to two or more S-structure phrases. In a nutshell, ambiguity denotes that despite a word, phrase, or sentence being technically accurate, there may still be confusion about its meaning or structure.

Pragmatic ambiguity

Ambiguity may be categorized using a variety of criteria and viewpoints. In terms of linguistic branches, Qiu Shude asserts that there are four different types of ambiguity. The first is word-formation ambiguity, which primarily deals with the internal structures of compounds and derivational words as well as their ambiguous semantic relationships. For instance, the word "unlockable" has two meanings in the statement "The door is unlockable." One is "unlock+able" and the other is "un+lockable" when each one is examined in relation to its own structure or formation. Being able to unlock the door in the first case, while being unable to lock it in the second. The second is phonetic ambiguity, which deals with ambiguity brought on by suprasegmental language characteristics like stress, tone, intonation, and pitch, among others. For instance, the term "an French teacher" might have two different meanings, namely, a teacher who teaches French and a teacher who is French. The two interpretations are separated from one another. The third one is semantic ambiguity, which asserts that ambiguity is produced by the alteration of lexical meanings and the involvement of semantic relations within sentence construction. Consider the question, "Have you finished the book?" We are unable to determine the precise meaning of the word "finished" in this statement since it might refer to the completion of either the writing or the reading of the book.

The fourth one is pragmatic ambiguity. The type of ambiguity that manifests in language use is referred to as pragmatic ambiguity, in Qiu Shude's opinion. This sort of uncertainty manifests itself in a pragmatic setting. As everyone is aware, pragmatics is the study of how language users utilize sentences to achieve effective communication (Dai Weidong, 2002). When a speaker uses ambiguous, indefinite language to convey many meanings or pressures to the listener at once, pragmatic ambiguity results (Chi Yufeng, 2003). The conversation's ambiguity, the speaking act, the reference, the implicature, and the assumption are among its five components. The phrasing is unclear and imprecise. The English joke's amusing phrases and remarks also fall under this category.

FUNCTIONS OF PRAGMATIC AMBIGUITY ON THE ENGLISH JOKE

The English joke and pragmatic ambiguity

According to Xu Lixin, jokes are one type of funny genres that denote common categories of humor like jokes and quips that have distinct discourse patterns. The joke falls under comedy. Humor is a universal human phenomena that can be seen in many facets of life, in many types of interactions between people, and notably in jokes and hilarious expressions (Xu Lixin, 2003). According to a common definition, humor refers to the characteristics of an occurrence that make us chuckle. According to Palmer (1994:3, Xu Lixin 2003), humor encompasses both the mechanisms by which this "funniness" arises as well as everything that is really or potentially amusing. *The definition of humor in the English edition of the encyclopedia is a joke, quip, or narrative that ends with a hilarious surprise twist or punch line. Through the use of allusions, ironies, puns, and other rhetorical strategies, humor is frequently communicated and applied. So, the joke also expresses one type of humor in the same way. The term "joke" has been used broadly in literature to refer to any genres that are intended just to express humor, hence excluding discourses. According to Xu Lixin (2003), the term "joke" is only used to describe the hilarious tale genre. This essay focuses on jokes in general, particularly English jokes, which use ambiguity to serve unique pragmatic purposes.* The English joke is prone to having the pragmatic ambiguity known as implicature. The word implicature was created when Grice proposed the cooperation concept. I conclude that implicature ambiguity on the English humor has diverse purposes and obtains special consequences by violating the cooperative principles, based on the idea of implicature ambiguity among pragmatic ambiguity. However, there are other pragmatic ambiguities in the English humor than implicature ambiguity. Other forms of pragmatic ambiguity also have an impact on the English humor in other ways. I shall carefully examine the pragmatic ambiguity's effects on the English humor in the next section.

The analyses of functions of pragmatic ambiguity on the English joke

The most common type of humor is the English joke. It includes various comedic genres as well as pragmatic ambiguity. In this section, I examine pragmatic ambiguity's emergence and the purposes it serves by using the English joke as a starting point. It is important to note that English jokes frequently take the shape of discourse. The following analysis of the effects of pragmatic ambiguity on them will use a number of cases.

(1) The recreational function

The English joke is made engaging and funny in large part by pragmatic ambiguity. Through the breach of the relation maxim in the cooperative principle, one example is provided to illustrate the pragmatic ambiguity's amusing function.

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 the breach of the relational principle allows pragmatic ambiguity to more fully express its function. English jokes typically refer to the disobedience of a relationship axiom. Speaker A responds to Speaker B with an unexpected response. The word "used" has two connotations in B's statement. It appears that there is semantic uncertainty as a result of the transformation of lexical meanings. However, the term "used" undergoes a semantic transformation in a context that is related to its usage. It therefore falls under the category of pragmatic ambiguity, which makes language jocular and amusing and can amuse speakers. It is known as the pragmatic ambiguity's recreational function.

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 various allusions are where the joke's ambiguity resides. Only vague references to the driver are given by speaker A, such as the left, center, and right ones. In addition to the uncertain scenario, references also need to be updated. In this instance, the speaker B is unable to differentiate between references that change as the context shifts. The main source of the humor is that the allusion is unclear. The purpose of uncertainty in this situation is also to give people pure delight.

(2) The social function

There is another essential role for pragmatic ambiguity in the English humor, in addition to the plain sheerness it offers. It serves a societal purpose. I explain it by examining a specific instance.

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 case, pragmatic ambiguity transgresses the manner principle. In actuality, speaker B is unwilling to listen to the piano. Speaker B mishears "piece" for "peace" because the terms "piece" and "peace" have the same transcription. Because obscurity of terms was not avoided, pragmatic ambiguity emerges in this scenario. The piano is getting old to speaker B, in his heart. However, he is reluctant to express it out loud because doing so would offend the mother and her daughter. This two words being mispronounced definitely helps him. He expertly used pragmatic ambiguity to make a comedy out of his actual thoughts about the piano playing without upsetting anyone.

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.

The man brought his wife a modest present when he got home that evening. The Meaning of Dreams was the book she discovered after tearing off the wrapping paper.

In this case, pragmatic ambiguity is demonstrated by the husband's disregard for his wife's involvement. Insinuating that her husband should buy the diamond necklace for her after she informed her husband that she had dreamed about receiving one, the husband's wife said, "What do you think it means?" By doing this, she was able to say what she actually felt without risking embarrassment if her husband did not agree because she had not asked him directly. Although he knew what his wife meant, he was unable to grant her requests. He decided to overlook his wife's implicature by applying the literal interpretation of his wife's statements since he did not want to reject his wife directly. In order to assist his wife understand the significance of her dream, he got her a book titled *The Meaning of Dreams*. He avoided insulting both of them directly, saving her wife's face and himself money in the process. This kind of pragmatic ambiguity therefore has a positive practical and social impact. It is apparent in the social aspect.

(3) The aesthetic function

The aesthetic role of pragmatic ambiguity is another. According to Liu Changyuan, one area of philosophy that deals with the notions of beauty and good taste is aesthetics. In the English joke, veiled effects are achieved, the speaker's aim is carried out, and a sense of beauty is conveyed via the use of ambiguous and implicit language. This function might be thought of as falling under the purview of aesthetics. Various interactions in various literary works can be viewed as jokes in the broadest sense. The ambiguity of assumption can be used to express this type of English humor.

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 ways that they "think of" have various presuppositions. While speaker B believes that speaker A is not very attractive, speaker A believes that she is pretty attractive. In terms of the aesthetic function of the pragmatic ambiguity, the multiple presuppositions control the meaning switch, indicating a unique implicature and creating implicit yet humorous consequences.

(4) The emphasizing function.

In order to create pragmatic ambiguity and give English humor some implicature, several figures of speech can be used. This rhetorical ambiguity serves several purposes, including stressing.

I parse it using one instance.

Joke Example 6:

In G.B.Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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

Here, the rhetorical trick of "understatement" is used. This phrase might signify two different things. It has a murky tone. From a literal perspective, Liza's father doesn't consume a lot of wine. Her father, on the other hand, is a strong drinker. Actually, the purpose of "understatement" is to make the latter idea stand out by being expressed insufficiently.

(5) The satirizing function

Rhetorical ambiguity plays a role in this satirical function. We can see that certain jokes in the English language have an ironic or sarcastic tone. These jokes once had decent meanings. But they have to be interpreted within a specific framework.

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.

Rich lady Speaker A is the speaker. She is currently at the picture studio. The speaker B parodies her by using the term "negative" in a pun. The photographic plate is what "Negative" originally meant. It also has the reverse of "positive" in its connotation. A pun used in a creative way can have sarcastic and funny results. In other words, this English joke's rhetorical ambiguity serves a satirical purpose.

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 phrase "I love you" has an ambiguous reference to both "I" and "you," which causes the ambiguity. The husband had his doubts that his wife had truly meant her declaration of love for him when she stated, "I love you." Therefore, he deliberately teased his wife by asking, "Is that you or the wine talking?" His wife retaliated by claiming that she was speaking to the wine, implying that she was saying I love the wine rather than you. Therefore, "I" and "you" can each refer to one of the woman and one of the wine in the phrase "I love you." The duo makes fun of one another by playing off the ambiguity of the allusion. Thus, pragmatic ambiguity may help to create an English joke with satirical overtones.

CONCLUSION

Language ambiguity may be divided into four categories. Researchers studying ambiguity pay the most attention to pragmatic ambiguity among them. The pragmatic ambiguity of the English joke is discussed in this essay. In this type of humor, several pragmatic ambiguity functions may be detected and recognized. By examining a few examples of the many different types of English jokes, we can deduce that pragmatic ambiguity serves a variety of purposes, including amusement for people, granting wishes for people, aesthetic expression of implicit meaning, emphasizing a point or idea, and even satirizing someone or something. Once we are aware of these pragmatic ambiguity functions in humor, particularly in English jokes, we may use language flexibility to our advantage and make the most of our pragmatic ability.

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