

Ambiguity of Chinese Language

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Ambiguity of Chinese Language (e.g. Tang Poetry)

Ambiguity is a common and interesting phenomenon in all natural languages. Since there is no compulsory correspondence between the form and the meaning of a language, a form can have many meanings. The conditions for the emergence of ambiguity in Chinese language are as follows. Firstly, Chinese is a language laying emphasis on parataxis. Secondly, the meaning of sentences is mostly implicit. Thirdly, the Chinese vocabulary and grammar are complex.

I. The Definition of Ambiguity

According to Oxford English Dictionary, ambiguity can refer to the state of having more than one possible meaning. In this regard, the phenomenon of ambiguity in a language means that writing or utterance can be understood in multiple ways, resulting in the uncertainty of meaning.

II. The Reasons for Ambiguity of Chinese Language

There are two main reasons for the ambiguity of Chinese language. One is from the lexical level, and another is from the grammatical level.

1. Lexical Factors

The Chinese character is a combination of pronunciation, meaning and form. When considering the ambiguity caused by lexical factors, we need to consider the above three elements. In this regard, there are four reasons for ambiguity in Chinese: **polysemy, polyphone, homonym and homophone**. Polysemy refers to one character with multiple meanings. Polyphone means that the meaning of a character varies with its pronunciation. Homonym happens when two characters with the same pronunciation and the same form can indicate different things related to the same element, which is less common in Chinese. Homophone are characters with the same pronunciation but different form and meaning.

2. Grammatical factors

Grammar is the grammatical relationship and grammatical structure among words,

phrases, sentences and other linguistic units, and the ambiguity in the grammatical level is mainly caused by the complexity of lexis and syntax. There are seven types of it. The first one is the ambiguity caused by **the multi-category words**, which means that a word often has two or more grammatical functions in a sentence. The meaning of the sentence will vary with its different grammatical functions. The second one is the uncertain **structural relationship** between different phrases, where a certain phrase may modify the phrase that follows it, or the former may be a parallel component of the latter. The third one refers to **the different division of structure level** in the sentence, which divides different structures together to form different sense groups, which will cause different meaning in a sentence. The fourth one is the uncertainty of **the relationship between the giver and the receiver or the unknown giver or receiver of an action**, because the subject in some sentences can be understood as both the giver and the receiver of the action, or the giver or receiver can be understood in many ways. The fifth one is the ambiguity of **the possessive relation**, which mainly means that something may be associated with a person or belong to that person. What's more, there are some ambiguities caused by the combination of the above reasons, which is more complicated.

III. The Classification of Ambiguity of Chinese

According to the above reasons for the ambiguity in Chinese, it can be classified into **phonetic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, grammatical ambiguity, semantic ambiguity and pragmatic ambiguity.**

There are two kinds of phonetic ambiguities. One is the ambiguity caused by homophone, which is more common in oral Chinese, like the characters of "石" "食" "十" with the same pronunciation "shí" and the words of "法制" and "法治" with the same pronunciation of "fǎ zhì", and the other is the ambiguity caused by polyphone, which is more common in writing Chinese, like the character of "薄" with the pronunciation of "báo" "bò" and "bó".

Lexical ambiguity mainly refers to the different understandings of the meaning of

a word. For example, in the sentence "他原来是医生", it can be understood as "He turns out to be a doctor" or "He used to be a doctor."

The types of grammatical ambiguity are mainly as follows: one is the different structural relations, such as the sentence "他们老师工作很努力", which can be understood as "Their teachers are hard-working" or "Teachers, they are hard-working"; one is the different division of syntactic levels, such as "姐姐和弟弟的朋友", which can be interpreted as "sister and brother's friend (姐姐/和弟弟的朋友)" or "sister's and brother's friend (姐姐和弟弟/的朋友)"; one is the different structural relations and syntactic divisions, such as "咬死了猎人的狗", which can be understood as "killed the hunter's dog (咬死了/猎人的狗)" or "the dog that killed the hunter (咬死了猎人/的狗)"; one is different grammatical functions of multi-category words, such as "给我看看这幅画", which can be understood as "please have a look at the painting for me" or "please let me have a look at the painting".

There are two sorts of semantic ambiguity: one is different semantic relations, such as the uncertain relation of giving and receiving and the relation of possession, such as "她的妈妈明天要做手术", in which her mother can be the one who performs the surgery or the one who accepts the surgery, and the other is the ambiguous semantic orientation, such as "老王有一个儿子, 很骄傲", in which the person who is proud is uncertain.

Pragmatic ambiguity is mainly generated in the process of people's interaction and communication, mainly referring to the possibility of different understandings of a certain discourse in different contexts. For example, "你可真行", which can be a kind of praise or irony according to different contexts.

IV. The Function of Ambiguity

Usually, ambiguity is to be avoided, because if ambiguity occurs in correspondence or oral conversation, it will cause both parties cannot be sure each other's intention, thus affecting the effectiveness of communication. At the same time, ambiguity can be effectively avoided. Context is an effective means of eliminating

ambiguity. Many words can be interpreted in many ways out of context, but once there is a specific context, the meaning of the words in the context is fixed. However, the phenomenon of ambiguity should not be viewed only in a negative manner. **It has a special aesthetic function in poetry.** The ambiguity space of poetry refers to how many ways a poem (or a word and phrase) can be understood. Without linguistic ambiguity, poetry would lose its unique artistic charm. According to many ancient poetry critics, an important criterion to test whether a poem is an excellent work is to see how many interpretations it can raise. As the saying goes: "Words have an end but meanings are endless". Great works tend to have numerous profound connotations and meanings, which have been the subject of endless debate and exploration by generations of readers and critics. This leads to a function of ambiguity, namely, to achieve the beauty of ambiguity in ancient poetry.

V. Ambiguity of Chinese Poetry in Tang Dynasty

In this part, the five types of ambiguity mentioned in the above chapter will be analyzed by taking Tang poetry as an example.:

1. Phonetic Ambiguity

Poets often employ homophone to achieve the aesthetic effect of ambiguity. For example,

《竹枝词》

刘禹锡

杨柳青青江水平，闻郎江上踏歌声。

东边日出西边雨，道是无晴却有晴。

This poem indicates a young girl's confusion, affection and wishes after hearing her Mr. Right singing. The key ambiguous character in the poem is ‘晴(qing)’, which has the same pronunciation with another character ‘情(qing)’. The former one means the changeable weather, while the later one can refer to the affection of the young girl.

2. Lexical Ambiguity

《逢雪宿芙蓉山主人》

刘长卿
日暮苍山远，
天寒白屋贫。
柴门闻犬吠，
风雪夜归人。

This poem tells that the poet stayed at a man's house in the mountain on a wintry night without too many complex expressions. However, there are a lot of lexical ambiguities in it. Firstly, "苍山" can be understood as a mountain named Cangshan Mountains, or just the far-away vast mountains. Secondly, "白屋" can be interpreted as the white house of the owner cover by the white snow, or the miserable housing condition of the poor owner. Thirdly, who is the "归人"? It can be the poet himself or the owner of the house.

3. Grammatical Ambiguity

In poetry, the different division within the lines can make it possible to achieve special effect of ambiguity. For example,

《清明》
杜牧
清明时节雨纷纷，路上行人欲断魂。
借问酒家何处有，牧童遥指杏花村。

It can be divided like this:

清明时节，雨纷纷路上，行人欲断魂。
借问酒家，何处有牧童，遥指杏花村。

In this way, the connotation of the poem has changed dramatically. The original poem says that the shepherd boy helps the pedestrian to find the wineshop, but the changed one says that the owner of the wineshop helps the pedestrian to find the shepherd boy.

4. Semantic Ambiguity

A single word will have different semantic orientations, and can convey a deeper meaning through the surface words. For example,

《乐游原》

李商隐

向晚意不适，驱车登古原。

夕阳无限好，只是近黄昏。

The last two lines of this poem “夕阳无限好，只是近黄昏” depicts a picture of "the afterglow of the sun, the sunset filling the sky, and the coming of the quiet night". But the semantic orientation of "黄昏(dusk)" is uncertain. The poet's sense of the decline of the times, the pain of the sinking of the family and country, and the sadness of his life are all integrated together in the picture of the scene at dusk, giving the poem a profound philosophical meaning that has been widely quoted in later times.

5. Pragmatic Ambiguity

The ambiguity caused by the context is more implicit and interesting。

《锦瑟》

李商隐

锦瑟无端五十弦，一弦一柱思华年。

庄生晓梦迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鹃。

沧海月明珠有泪，蓝田日暖玉生烟。

此情可待成追忆，只是当时已惘然。

The poem is one of the most ambiguous of all, and its subject is so diverse that it has been interpreted in a wide range of ways. Some say it is a summary of the poet's life in his later years, some think it is a poem of mourning, some think it is a poem of remembrance for a female Taoist priest who had an affair with the poet, and others say it is a poem about a musical instrument. In fact, the different understanding of the implicit subject of a poem is its charm and beauty, which allows it to display new vigor and vitality in different times.

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