An Analysis of English Ambiguity and Its Value in Practical Use*

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In communication, we usually decode meaning in these levels: grammatical level, semantic level, and pragmatic level. Most of our misunderstandings of the other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to understand their words, but to fail to understand their intention. Thus, when we decode a sentence, we should make clear both the structure and the meaning of it. If not, ambiguous structure and meaning of it are caused. This paper discusses and analyzes different types of English ambiguity. As these ambiguities are easily to cause language obstacles or misunderstandings in communication and discourses, some methods to avoid or eliminate them are suggested. However, English ambiguity is not a negative language phenomenon all the time, it also can benefit the English language very much in the way of being regarded as a type of rhetoric, called pun. Then how to understand puns will be stated, and the methods of how to translate it will also be suggested in order to estimate its practical value.

Keywords: ambiguity, pun, translation, practical value

Introduction

In English, we decode a sentence usually in these levels: One is the grammatical level, in which we make clear the sentence structure. The second level is the semantic level, in which hearers and readers understand the meaning by analyzing the structure of the sentence. The third level is the pragmatic one. In communication, most of our misunderstandings of the other people are not due to any inability to hear them or to understand their words. The most important course of difficulties in communication is that we so often fail to understand a speaker’s intention. So the third level (pragmatic level) is very important for hearers to get the deep meaning of the structure.

Thus, when we decode a sentence, we should make clear both the structure and the meaning of it. If not, ambiguous structure and meaning of it are caused. So what is ambiguity? An ambiguous sentence is usually of doubtful meaning, because it can be interpreted in more than one way or many other ways. It is universally recognized and demonstrable fact that many of the acceptable utterances of English and other languages are ambiguous: They can be interpreted in two or more different ways. Frequently, though not always, their ambiguity passes unnoticed in everyday language-behavior, because the context is such that all but one of the possible interpretations are irrelevant or relatively improbable (Lyons, 1977). In modern linguistics, ambiguity refers to those words, phrases or sentences, which abide by the grammatical rules in structure, and conform to the logical common sense in meaning, but include more than one way to be understood, or more than one structural aspect to be analyzed from their deep structures.

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Linguists of ancient times did not pay much attention to the study of ambiguity. However, it has greatly changed since Saussure. Kooij (1971) systematically studied ambiguity in natural languages. His ambiguity in natural languages is a great contribution not only to the study of ambiguity but also to the psycholinguistic research. Grice (1975), a contemporary American linguist, expounded ambiguity from the perspective of conversational implicature. In his Manner Maxim in Cooperation Principle, “avoid ambiguity” has been mentioned. Leech (1981) defined ambiguity from the perspective of semantics. Chomsky (1957) is the linguist of TG (transformational-generative) grammar. In his syntactic structure, he stated, “The precision of grammar depends on how it explains ambiguity” (p. 216).

Classification of Ambiguity

There are many different ways to classify ambiguity. But generally speaking, the criterion of classification chiefly comes from the cause that leads to ambiguity (QIU, 1998, p. 2). From the angle of linguistics, ambiguity can be divided into phonological ambiguity, semantic (lexical) ambiguity, syntactic (grammatical) ambiguity, and pragmatic ambiguity.

Phonological Ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity may be homonyms, stress, and liaison of words. Homonyms are pairs and groups of words, though different in meanings, which are pronounced alike, or spelled alike, or both. In English, there are many such words. Phonological ambiguity only appears in spoken language (see Example 1).

Example (1) “How is bread made?”

“I know that!” Alice cried eagerly, “You take some flour.”

“Where do you pick the flower?” the White Queen asked. “In a garden or in the hedges?”

“Well. It isn’t picked at all.” Alice explained. “It’s ground…”

“How many acres of ground?” said the White Queen.

Just like the “flour” and “flower” in the above example, in this short conversation, Alice and the White Queen talk about the different thing and they have misunderstood each other. Then they have different interpretations of the word “ground” again. Alice uses “ground” as a verb, which is the past participle of the verb “grind”, while the White Queen uses “ground” as a noun which means “earth”. Although they have misunderstood each other about the two words, the conversation can still go on. It is really humorous. This is the charm of the language.

Semantic Ambiguity

English is a language which consists of abundant lexemes, among which there are many polysemies and homonyms. In some situations, contexts can not determine the meanings of polysemies or homonyms definitely. So, ambiguities appear (see Examples 2-4).

Example (2) The sled was without runners (London, 1981, p. 169).

Here, “runner” is a noun which has two meanings: One is “driver” and the other is “wheel”. The paraphrases and translations are: (a) There was no driver on the sled; and (b) The sled got no wheels.

Example (3) After the operation, she could not bear children.

The “bear” here has at least two interpretations: One is “give birth to” and the other is “tolerate”. So the
paraphrases and translations can be: (a) She could not give birth to children after the operation; and (b) She could not tolerate children after the operation.

Example (4) He wears a light suit in the summer.

The adjective “light” has two meanings here: One is “light in weight” and the other is “light in color”. So, this sentence can be rendered as: (a) In summer, he wears a suit which is light in weight; and (b) In summer, he wears a suit which is light in color.

Above are the examples of lexical ambiguity involving notional words. And functional words also likely to form ambiguities (see Examples 5-6).

Example (5) As Dalrymple designed the engine, he must have realized its great capabilities.

The adverbial clause introduced by “as” can be either the one of cause or of time. So “as” may be regarded as “because” or “while” (Quirk, 1972, p. 165).

Example (6) The child looks backward.

“Backward” is a word which can be either adjective or adverb. As an adjective, it means “behind in development”; as an adverb, it means “towards the back”. So this sentence means: (a) This child looks towards the back; and (b) This child is behind in development.

We can see that lexical ambiguity is not only caused by polysemies, but also by the connections or grammatical relationships among words. Words or phrases which appear in single sentences or pieces of language fragments may be very possible to be ambiguous, but if all of these sentences or language fragments appear in specific language situations, the ambiguities may have little chance to exist. For instance, “It is too cold to drink”. The “it” here can be regarded as weather, season, etc., but if it appears in a specific context, the meaning of “it” will be very clear, such as: “Why don’t you drink your black tea?” “It is too cold to drink”. So the “it” here is “a cup of cold black tea”.

Syntactic Ambiguity

A syntactically ambiguous sentence is any sentence to which there is assigned more than one structure analysis at the grammatical level of analysis. It is also clear that their ambiguity does not depend upon homonymies or polysemies, but is of the kind that naturally accounted for in terms of the notion of phrase-structure (Lyons, 1977, p. 396) (see Example 7).

Example (7) She answered all the questions on the paper.

The syntactic ambiguity occurs when the prepositional phrase may modify the verb or the noun “question”. If the PP (perpositional phrase) modifies the verb, it means: She wrote down her answers on the paper, if the PP modifies “questions”, the sentence means: She answered the questions which were written on the paper.

Besides, comparative clauses can also cause ambiguity. Let us take the sentence “A is three times larger than B” as an example, this sentence has two interpretations. Therefore, we may regard that this sentence pattern really has ambiguity, and cease the dispute. Thus, we had better use another sentence pattern, avoiding utilizing the ambiguous pattern. For example, we can say “A is three times as large as B”. And if we meet “A is three times larger than B” through reading or translation, we can eliminate the ambiguity by analyzing the sentences by common or specific knowledge. For instance, “Asia is four times larger than Europe”. A person who possesses a little geographical knowledge might know that this sentence means “Asia is four times as large as Europe”.

Privatives are also one of the reasons to cause ambiguity. For example: “The meeting was not held because of his suggestion” may mean “The meeting was not held because of his suggestion” or “because of his suggestion, the meeting was not held”, and “The meeting was held, but not because of his suggestion”.

**Pragmatic Ambiguity**

Pragmatic ambiguity appears in context where the language is actually in use. Pragmatics concentrates on those aspects of meaning that cannot be predicted by linguistic knowledge about the physical and social world (Peccei, 2000, p. 198) (see Example 8):

Example (8) He is like a fish.

This sentence has several different meanings according to various contexts. If the speaker is speaking in a swimming pool, it means: “He is good at swimming”. If the speaker is speaking in a party, it means: “He can drink much”. So, context is very important to decomposition of pragmatic ambiguity.

There are many reasons for the ambiguities appearing in these sentences. However, the major one is the semantic relationship among some of the words in these sentences.

**Practical Value**

What we discussed above have analyzed and commented on English ambiguity, Ambiguity is properties of language and there is no need to be dismissed as an expression of the imperfection or inferiority of natural language. However, ambiguous phenomenon still has its practical value. Pun is a rhetoric method which takes the positive use of ambiguity ingeniously. Then, what is a pun? Pun is a witticism involving the playful use of a word in different sense or of words which differ in meaning but sound alike. It is “a figure of speech depending upon a similarity of sound and disparity of meaning”. A pun is usually based on three conditions: double contexts, a hinge (the word used as a pun), and a trigger (the key elements which make the pun possible) (WANG, 1996, p. 83). Puns are usually employed for jocular and humorous effect; sometimes it also attacks the sentence meaning by innuendo. Therefore, it is often employed in stories, jokes, riddles, etc.

Since many literature tycoons often employ puns in their works, it has become a brilliant method of rhetoric shining among others.

**Types of Pun**

Homophone: Words which have the same sounds or sounds alike, but different meanings may form the homophone (see Example 9):

Example (9) Here is a mourning Rome, a dangerous Rome.


Here, “Rome” has the similar pronunciation with “room”. Rome reflects the meaning of “room”, and indicates that Rome had no place for Octavius.

Homograph: Words which have more than one meaning may form the homograph accidentally or intentionally. Leech (1981) had classified words meanings into seven types, and this may help us analyze the homograph (see Examples 10-11).

Example (10) “… They were adding more than a spice of adventure to their much envied and ever-ending Rome by a Safari in what was known as Darkest Africa…” (Hemingway, 1998, p. 13).
Here, the denotative meaning of “the darkest” is referring to an extremely dark color. On the one hand, we may decided that the surface meaning is that people living in this area of Africa had the darkest skin color; on the other hand, it also refers that the social environment there was in chaos and is the most uncivilized one in Africa. It is the foreshadowing of Macomber’s murder by his wife later.

Example (11) I pore over these cheeses without any result or enlightenment until dinner-time,… I have a slice of a bread to help me out with the cheeses, and am considered in disgrace for the rest of the evening (Dickens, 1981, p. 307).

Here, “to help me out with the cheeses” is a pun. It can be understood as “I eat up the cheeses by the aid of the bread” or “as a punishment, I only can get a s lick of bread, for not having solve the mathematics problem of the cheese”.

Translation of Pun

Before we examine some of the major problems facing the translation of literary texts, it should be pointed out that some of them are not restricted to literary translation whereas others have specifically literary characters. Moreover, it should be kept in mind that some of the problems are linked to language differences in extralinguistic physical settings and in social and culture customs (Kempson, 1972, p. 37).

As to the translation of puns, many translators have taken their efforts to try it. From these translations we can see that some puns can be translated, while others are very difficult to get satisfactory translations. Then the rest of the thesis will introduce some methods of how to render puns.

The ideal way to translate a pun is that the translation can keep the meaning and the form of a pun as it originally presented in the English version (see Example 12).

Example (12) “… your sister is given to government” (Dickens, Great Expectation, 1992, p. 124).

The word “government” is a pun: one meaning is “ruling” and the other is “the state government”. “Joe” meant the first one, while Pipu understood it as the second. This pun seems difficult to translate. The translator used the Chinese character “” which is a homophone to “”, reappearing the taste of the pun in Chinese.

However, the Chinese translation is not satisfying enough, for the pronunciations of the words “” and “” are not much alike, meanwhile, few people may feel the meaning of “ruling” from the word “”, whose meaning has little resemblance to the meaning of “”. Thus, this Chinese version is considered not to match the English version very well, then the other translation is tried: “......”.

The “” can apparently be understood in two ways, one is the adjective, referring to that kind of people who possesses power; and the other is to regard “” as noun phrase, meaning the possession of power and the ability of ruling, and the “” as an additional function word. By this way, the Chinese version can match the English better and fit Chinese language custom better (FU, 1993, p. 37).
Another puns, in the process of translation, lose some of their senses. However, they may be compensated by the Chinese expressions to some extent (see Example 13).

Example (13) Joe… when her eyes were withdrawn, secretly crossed his two forefingers, and exhibited them to me, as our token that Mrs. Joe was in a cross temper. (Dickens, Great Expectation, 1992, p. 351).

“Cross” can both mean “an object ‘+’” or “anger”. In Chinese, we cannot find out a word which can take both of the meanings at the same time. But the translation above is so plain that it almost ignores the pun which is very obvious here. Thus, another translation is tried: “十字”和“生气”

Here, the words “十字” and “生气” sound alike, and this, hopefully, may compensate the sense of the pun a little (Fu, 1993, p. 89).

For the translation of another puns, translators really have not the ability to find a way out, for, firstly, they cannot pick out a suitable word; and secondly, cannot compensate the pun in one way or another. Therefore, the only way is to try all the best to keep the original meaning in the target language (see Example 14).

Example (14) Here Lies Lester Moore

Four Slangs from a 44

No Less No More (Cunningham, 1993, p. 28).

Here, the “No less No more” has two meanings, one is Lester is no more, he was dead. Second, “no less no more than four billet were short him”. This sentence pattern is very hard to translate. If we add some notes to explain it, that will destroy the style of the poem, and make the translation too complicated. So, the only way is to keep the main meaning and sacrifice the pun.

Actually, puns are very difficult to translate, and the three methods constructively suggested above, of course, cannot solve all the obstacles appearing during the processes of translating puns. The famous translator ZHU Shenghao once said that he had met great many puns, idioms, and English proverbs during his translation of Shakespeare’s works, however, a larger proportion of them, he ignored or put it in other ways, for it is very strenuous to search out perfect Chinese renders which can match the original English language well. So, the methods of translating pun better still requires more research, efforts, and intelligence.

Conclusions

Various types of ambiguities have been stated in this paper. However, the most efficient way to get rid of ambiguity is based on a full understanding of contexts. And pun, which makes language colorful and abundant, reveals one aspect of practical value of ambiguity, especially, lexical ambiguity. A few ways are suggested to understand it according to different types of word meanings and the connection between words and contexts. The translation of pun is always a painstaking work to language translators, for pun is a very delicate rhetorical device which is a perfect combination of pronunciation, form, and meaning. Some methods are provided for the translation of puns, wishing they could be a kind of advice or suggestions to those who are interested in it.
References