

Analysis of Chinese Xiehouyu from a Perspective of Cognitive Reference-Point

GUO Wei, GAO Wen-cheng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Xiehouyu (a two-part allegorical saying) is unique and refined, and the cultural load is rich and heavy. The use of Xiehouyu in verbal communication and literary works reflects the speaker's cognitive ability and language skills of operating and blending cognitive concepts dynamically. Langacker's reference-point theory has a high explanatory power and is a basic cognitive mode of human beings. This paper attempts to make a cognitive analysis of the structure and understanding of Xiehouyu by using reference-point theory, aiming at explaining its cognitive mechanism and meaning construction.

Keywords: Xiehouyu, cognitive reference point, cognitive mechanism

Introduction

Xiehouyu has a strong Chinese national characteristics, which is humorous and philosophical in content and is not straightforward. It is rooted in people's daily life and is popular among the people. It is widely used in daily life and even in important occasions, and it is often seen in ancient and modern literature. Therefore, this paper will apply the cognitive reference-point theory to analyze the unique linguistic form of Chinese Xiehouyu and reveal its cognitive mechanism of meaning, in order to provide a reference for the study of Xiehouyu and Chinese language culture.

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Previous Studies of Xiehouyu

XHYs are the linguistic manifestations of traditional Chinese culture, thought and custom. Whether in the world's language system or cultural system, Xiehouyu is unique. A complete Xiehouyu is a rhetorical discourse consisting of two parts connected by a hyphen, the first part of which is mostly a concrete image of description or simile, like a riddle, leading to the theme, called "lead"; and the second part is an explanation of the first part, like the answer of the riddle, which is explanatory and philosophical in nature, called "explanation". For example, "A dog biting Lü Dongbin—does not know a good person's heart", and the two parts are closely interrelated. In a certain linguistic environment, the latter half of the sentence can be understood or guessed by

GUO Wei, master, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, research interests: linguistics, translation.

GAO Wen-cheng, professor, master supervisor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, research interests: linguistics, comparative study between English and Chinese, translation.

saying “lead” and “omitting” the second half “explanation”, hence the name. Condensing the crystallization of the wisdom of the Chinese people and the personalized national cultural spirit, Xiehouyu is favored by scholars and has received extensive attention. They have carried out in-depth discussions on Xiehouyu from different aspects, such as grammar, classification, structure, translation and so on, and have achieved rich research results. Based on the perspective of annotation, Li Xiaoping (2004) observes and explores the semantic structure and interpretation of Xiehouyu, with the aim of revealing its literal meaning and implied meaning. Li Lei (2022) analyzes Xiehouyu from the semantic characteristics, and argues that Xiehouyu uses metaphors and puns to express literal meaning and actual meaning to a certain extent, and the color meaning above the rational meaning is further researched. With the rise of cognitive linguistics, an increasing number of scholars have used the relevant theories of cognitive linguistics to study the cognitive mechanism of XHYs. Chen Yan and Zeng Xianmo (2022) analyze Xiehouyu with conceptual integration theory, revealed the cognitive basis of four network types of Xiehouyu, and demonstrated the meaning construction process of Chinese Xiehouyu. From the perspective of embodied linguistics, Wang Yin (2020) finds that the embodied nature of XHYs presents such characteristics as “basicity, contrast, interactivity, plurality, and mapping”. To sum up, it can be seen that most scholars only pay attention to the surface form of Xiehouyu, but few scholars study the internal meaning construction process of it. Numerous scholars who focus on the meaning construction of XHYs have explored it from the conceptual integration theory, figure-ground theory, metaphor and metonymy theory, etc., while fewer studies have analyzed the cognitive mechanism of XHYs from the cognitive reference-point theory. Therefore, starting from Langacker’s (1991) cognitive reference-point theory, this paper explains the meaning construction mechanism of XHYs, in order to provide a new perspective for the study of Xiehouyu.

Reference-Point Theory

Langacker (1991) first introduces the cognitive reference-point theory into linguistics, which has strong explanatory power as well as great potential for use. That is, the cognitive subject selects a certain tool concept as a cognitive reference point, and lets it to activate another target concept in the conceptual system which is closely related to it. Therefore, Langacker proposes the cognitive reference-point theory and establishes a schema to illustrate people’s cognitive process more intuitively, as shown in Figure 1.

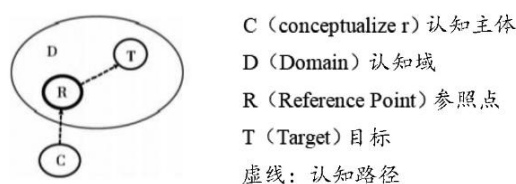


Figure 1. Reference-Point Theory.

Langacker (1991) calls the linguistic symbol used to activate the conceptual structure as reference point (point R in Figure 1); the concept activated is called the target (point T in Figure 1); C (conceptualizer) is the subject of cognitive activity; D (dominion) is the cognitive domain dominated by the reference point, and the cognitive target should be within this cognitive domain, but the subject of cognitive activity may not be included. Point R is selected as a cognitive reference point due to its own significant characteristics and the requirements of specific occasions. The operation mechanism of cognitive reference-point model can be

understood as: cognitive subject C finds the cognitive target through the psychological cognitive path, activates the most prominent reference point R in the cognitive domain D and then finds the target T. The relationship among the conceptualizer, the reference point and the cognitive target is called the “reference point structure”.

Cognitive Reference-Point Theory in Xiehouyu

Xiehouyu can be divided into “literal meaning of Xiehouyu”, “metaphorical meaning of Xiehouyu” and “metonymic meaning of Xiehouyu”. Literal meaning of Xiehouyu refers to the literal meaning of the latter part of Xiehouyu is the actual meaning of it. Metaphorical meaning of Xiehouyu and metonymic meaning of Xiehouyu mean that in addition to the literal meaning, the second half of Xiehouyu also has a meaning derived from the literal meaning, and the derived meaning is the real meaning of Xiehouyu. The semantic relationship between the “lead” and “explanation” of Xiehouyu is very close. In order to recognize the final meaning of Xiehouyu and its content at a more abstract level, the conceptualizer needs to make use of this semantic relation and take part of the content as the cognitive reference point, and then through multiple reasoning along the mental path, the true meaning of “explanation” can be recognized from the “lead” of Xiehouyu.

Interpretation of Cognitive Reference Points of XHYs

The structure of Xiehouyu can be expressed as: “lead”-“explanation”, the two parts of which constitute a relational statement.

Literal meaning of Xiehouyu

The literal meaning of Xiehouyu means that the basic meaning of the Xiehouyu is equivalent to the literal meaning of “explanation”. For example:

Examples:

- (1) Finding a needle in the haystack—nowhere to find
- (2) Zhuge Liang borrowed arrows with straw boats—there will be no return

This kind of Xiehouyu describes objective facts, and its annotation meaning is generally its surface meaning. A considerable part of XHYs are based on familiar things or phenomena, as well as some historical allusions, myths and so on. Therefore, in understanding these XHYs, we need to combine them with specific background encyclopedic knowledge and put them in a certain cognitive semantic framework to recognize them. In Example (1), “lead” describes a specific and easy-to-understand behavior—finding a needle in a haystack. “explanation” makes clear the behavior described by “lead” in a more abstract and shorter phrase, that is: finding a needle in a haystack is a very difficult thing, and it cannot be found at all. If “nowhere to find” were to appear here alone, it would be difficult to understand. “lead” is to provide a specific scene, that is, a reference point, for the listener to better understand the “explanation”, as the basis for the listener to infer the “explanation”. Taking the tangible and easy-to-understand scene of “finding a needle in a haystack” as a cognitive reference point, the cognitive subject can quickly understand the meaning of the target point “explanation”. In Example (2), based on the ability of cognitive reference point, cognitive subject C selects the prominent entity of Zhuge Liang as reference point R, and activates the cognitive domain D related to “Zhuge Liang” and some encyclopedias. Subsequently, take R as the reference point along a certain mental path to highlight and activate the reference point R1 “borrowed arrows with straw boats”, which is the fact of this historical allusion. According to the factual basis of this reference point, an accurate understanding of the

“explanation” of the target concept is finally achieved. As far as the listener or reader is concerned, with “Zhuge liang straw boats borrowing arrows” this familiar historical allusion as a cognitive reference point, once you see this “lead”, you will be able to immediately understand “there will no return” this “explanation”. From the examples, it can be found that “leads” are generally familiar things, phenomena or allusions to myths, etc., which are effortless to understand, more specific and easier to perceive, and more independent, so they usually act as cognitive reference points; “explanations” tend to be more abstract and rely on “leads” to understand, less independent and more difficult to perceive, so they usually act as targets.

Metaphorical meaning of Xiehouyu

There may be metaphors in the use of metaphorical meaning of Xiehouyu, which require deeper analysis to understand, and “the metaphorical meaning” is the basic and true meaning of the Xiehouyu. This is the prominent manifestation of the characteristics of Xiehouyu, and it also helps to achieve its pun effect. The structure of metaphorical meaning of Xiehouyu is complex, which can be divided into two categories: derivative and homophonic.

Homophonic Xiehouyu refers to the use of homophonic or similar syllables or harmonic meanings in the “explanation” to form the surface and deep meanings, so as to achieve the effect of pun or humor. Such as:

Example (3) Scallion mixed with tofu—one green (clear) two white

This Xiehouyu implements a pun in a homophonic way, and is usually used to describe a person or thing that is very clean, unstained and sinless, or to describe a situation that is very clear and unambiguous. In the cognitive reference point model, “scallion” and “tofu” in the “lead” are mutual reference points, and are the two parallel reference points R1 and R2 of the conceptual subject respectively. With R1 scallion as the reference point, the relevant target concepts in this cognitive domain are activated, such as the color and shape of the scallion. R2 Tofu also activates its related goal concept. When the two reference points activate their respective goal concepts, the knowledge of similar or different propositions between the two reference points will be cognitively projected, and finally the difference in color will be highlighted and become the reference point R3 “one green and two white”. Due to the similarity of the voice (qing), the fixed four-word phrase concept R4 “one clear and two white” stored in the brain is activated, guiding the cognitive subject along the psychological path, and finally identifying the deep meaning of the Xiehouyu, which means the innocence and clarity of someone or something. Generally speaking, this “lead” describes a common scene in life in order to provide a concrete reference for “explanation”, which is vivid and humorous to understand.

Derivative Xiehouyu means that the actual meaning of it emerges from the derivation of another meaning from one or more words in the latter part, which is based on the similarity of the real phenomenon reflected in the original and actual meanings. Such as:

Examples:

(4) Bittern curdles soy milk in tofu—there is always one thing to subdue another.

(5) Power poles on the road—stand aside.

Example (4) by extension, it means that someone or something specifically overpowers another person or another thing, metaphorically, things restrict each other, and one thing is always overpowered by another. The “lead” describes the life experience that bittern can make tofu coagulate. According to these two parallel reference points, the cognitive subject activates the relevant goal concepts in their respective cognitive domains,

and these conceptual goals are then cognitive projected. Then the restrictive relationship between the two becomes prominent and the reference point R3 is formed. This is similar or analogous to the core concept R4 in some of its features, namely structural metaphors. “Lead” describes this factual experience and provides a familiar and specific scene of life experience as a reference for “explanation” through structural metaphor. “Bittern” and “tofu” can metaphorically represent two people respectively at this time, and through the similarity (constraint) of reality structure as a reference basis, the cognitive subject can recognize the deeper derivation of the meaning-everything has its counterforce. The “lead” in Example (5) depicts a scene that can be seen everywhere in life, where the pole is the reference point R1 and the road is the reference point R2. The related target concepts of these two reference points in their respective cognitive domains are activated in the brain of the cognitive subject and carried out cognitive projection. According to life experience, the position relationship of the pole on the roadside is highlighted and becomes the reference point R3. Through structural similarity, the metaphor of loss or concession of rights can be recognized. The “explanation” in this Xiehouyu actually omits the behavioral subject (power), but as far as the cognitive subject is concerned, having the well-known specific life picture described by “lead” as a reference and cognitive projection can eventually follow the mental path to the deep meaning of this Xiehouyu. The use of concrete and tangible facts and phenomena of life as reference points not only makes understanding intuitive, but also makes the whole language seem life-like and colloquial, which is easy to be understood and accepted by the public.

Metonymic meaning of Xiehouyu

The cognitive mechanism of metonymy involves two main concepts: cognitive matrix and salience. In the structure of a Xiehouyu, the things described in the previous part can form a cognitive matrix, which includes what is stated and what is related to it. And the first part of the content will highlight something highly recognizable as a cognitive reference point, thus evoking something less cognitively salient in the latter part.

Examples:

(6) Cucumbers that have been sunning all day - wilted

(7) Pole a penny into the house - straight out and straight in

Example (6) describes a person who is not in spirits or feeling down. The “lead” activates and constructs a cognitive matrix related to “big sun, hot, long time, plants”, and the impact of this process on “cucumbers” is highlighted and becomes a reference point, thus leading to the result of “wilted”, which means that people have no spirit. This Xiehouyu implies a causal metonymy, the “lead” of which describes an event and the “explanation” of which is the result of that event. Example (7) contains a behavioral metonymy (manner refers to behavior), where the “lead” describes an action and the “explanation” is the manner of that action. Because the penny is a very long bamboo pole, and the door is far less long than the pole, so the pole cannot enter the door horizontally, only straight in and straight out. Metaphorically, it describes a person who speaks in a straightforward manner. The concrete picture described in the “lead” of this Xiehouyu (the way the penny enters the door) provides cognitive reference points for the literal and metonymic meanings of the “explanation”, which is easy to understand. The basic idea of these two sentences is that the agent chooses a specific concept as a reference point, and then he activates another target concept in his conceptual system that is related to it.

Conclusion

Chinese XHYs takes various forms and is rich in variety, but no matter how to define and classify them, the latter part of Xiehouyu (explanation) is the real intention of the speaker. The former part of Xiehouyu is the basis for highlighting the latter part, usually as a cognitive reference point; to a large extent, “explanation” relies on cognitive reference points in semantic understanding, and is highlighted and understood under the background of “lead”. This paper makes a cognitive analysis of the composition of Xiehouyu based on the cognitive reference-point theory, providing a reference and basis for the interpretation and cognitive mechanism of Xiehouyu’s “lead” and “explanation”, and revealing the relationship between the two, which not only provides more new perspectives and references for the study of Xiehouyu and the language system, but also helps people better understand and correctly use them. To a certain extent, it can promote the dissemination and development of Chinese excellent traditional culture.

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