An Analysis of the Understanding Mechanism of Humorous Message from the Perspective of Pragmatic Presupposition

Shuan-Jun AN¹,a,*, Ling YUAN¹,b

¹College of International Exchange, Bohai University, Jinzhou, Liaoning, China
a anshuanjun123@126.com, b 466828738@qq.com
*Corresponding author

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Abstract. The entertainment message of mobile is a language problem, which concerns all aspects of life and contains a wealth of cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge. A large part of message is humorous and interesting. We will discuss the understanding mechanism of humorous message from Pragmatic Presupposition. This study not only broadens the study field of pragmatic presupposition, but also provides a new perspective for people to study the message of mobile.

Foreword

With the popularity of mobile phones, message has become an important mode of communication in interpersonal interaction. Besides advantages of convenient and economic, the message of mobile has many other functions--such as alleviating the work pressure, harmonizing social relationships and so on--which mainly reflected in the entertainment of mobile phone text messages. Humorous messages will make us laugh. But, what is the reason why they make us laugh? This thesis aims to make a preliminary study on the understanding mechanism of humorous message from Pragmatic Presupposition.

Pragmatic Presupposition

Presupposition can usually be divided into two categories: semantic presupposition and pragmatic presupposition. Semantic presupposition is a semantic study based on the truth value of a statement. We mainly discuss pragmatic presupposition. Leech is a linguist who has made a prominent study of presupposition. He said: “The presupposition can be seen as ‘when speaker talk about X, he has already believed that Y is true’ from the pragmatic point of view” (Ding-fang SHU, 2001:361). Zi-ran HE said: “Pragmatic presupposition refers to the premise relationship what are sensitive to context and relate to the beliefs, attitudes and intentions of speaker (sometimes including the speaker).” (Zi-ran HE, 1997:68) Pragmatic presupposition has many characteristics, such as appropriate, common understanding, one-way, concealed etc. “In terms of discourse comprehension, pragmatic presupposition is generally required to satisfy two conditions, which are both unilateral and covert.” (Xin-ren CHEN, 1999:38). Pragmatic presupposition is not only a logical and semantic problem, but also has a close relationship with the speaker's cognitive concept. In addition, pragmatic presupposition has a great dependence on the context.

Analyzing the Understanding Mechanism of Humorous Message from Pragmatic Presupposition

Humorous Effects Produced by Pragmatic Presupposition

Humorous effects produced by presupposition's implication and common information. Pragmatic presupposition often produces the conversational meaning which beyond the sentence level, which can sometimes produce humorous effect when combined with the common information known by both sides of the communication.
E.g. (3) If there are no flowers, spring will be lonely; If there is no passion, the four seasons will be mediocre; without me, you will lose one person who mostly concerned about you! Without you, the rabbit will ask: “who should I race with?”

By the presupposition trigger-- “if”, we can have such a presupposition: the rabbit and “you” (the reader who read the message) race, but The Race between Hare and Tortoise is the common information known by both sides of the communication, and then we can obviously infer that the reader who read the message is the tortoise.

**Humorous effects produced by conflict of context presupposition.** Context is the circumstance where language units exist. Contexts are generally divided into the context of co-text and situational context (also called social reality context). By the influence of the context, the listener will make the corresponding presupposition--if the presupposition and the results are contradictory, humorous effect will usually been produced.

E.g. (4) A: I love to find out all sort of things since I was young. So I made a wish to be a detective when I grow up, and I’m the editor of one newspaper office now. How about you?

B: I love to play since I was young. So I wish to carry a lot of money and hangout everywhere when I grow up. Now I’m a bus conductor.

From example (4), we could know the communication between the two people is mainly about the desire of the young and the present work. A establishes and achieves his goals by his characteristic. B conforms to A’s sentence when he answers: originally talk about childhood preferences of himself, then, talk about his own desire. According to the context, the reader who read the message will make such a presupposition at this time: B is a rich man. But the result is out of their expectation, and B’s job has similarities to his childhood’s desire, all these make people laugh.

**Humorous effects produced by listener’s misunderstanding the speaker’s presupposition attention.** Before extract target language, people would like to elaborate their words, which can make the problem they discuss seemed not too abrupt. But if the recipient was confused to decide the primary and secondary of the speaker’s words, he is unable to understand the speaker’s real intention from verbal pragmatic presupposition.

E.g. (5) A leader’s speech—“Children are the flower of the motherland, are growing seedlings. But people keep having more children than the state’s policy. What will be the consequences in the future?” One person off the stage answer: “greening the motherland.”

From the trigger language “but”, such presupposition can be derived: the reality that population grows too fast should draw people’s attention. The leader leadership is intended to convey the social problems caused by population growth by using this presupposition. But the listener does not understand this intention and focus on the analogy used by the leader, “Children are the flower of the motherland, are growing seedlings”, and then come to the conclusion of “greening the motherland”. The conflict produced by the speaker's real intention from verbal pragmatic presupposition and the listener’s understanding result in a humorous effect.

**Humorous effects produced by cognitive misplacement.** “Not only pragmatic factors but also cognitive factors make the implication productive. To predict the implication of words, it is necessary to research people's cognitive style.” (Shen Jiaxuan, 2001:282) pragmatic presupposition is a kind of theory which is mean to conduct the implication of words and is also influenced by cognitive factors.

E.g. (6) A: Do you think I will watch you die?

B: I'll close my eyes!

On the basis of people's cognition, we can make the presupposition by the trigger language “you think”: I will not watch you die and I will help you. But the answer is out of people's expectations as it focuses the semantic point on “the eyes”-- with their eyes closed. So that people’s cognition becomes malposed. Two speakers ’intention produced contradiction.
Humorous Effects Produced by Pragmatic Presupposition Failure

Dealing with the ambiguity of information as a common knowledge. The common understanding of pragmatic presupposition refers to: pragmatic presupposition should adapt to the cognitive background of both speakers and listeners. In communication, the reason why the speaker use presupposition is mainly because he thinks the listener has the common background knowledge. So, the listener will not properly understand the speaker’s pragmatic presupposition if his background knowledge had differences with the speaker’s.

E.g. (1) A woman cried to her friend: “my husband left behind only san qian wan (thirty million) for me!” Friend is surprised: “shouldn’t you be happy? “Thirty million is -- qian wan (must) take good care of their children, qian wan (must) be filial to their parents and qian wan (must) never remarried, The woman explained.( qian wan means “must” in Chinese.)

The presupposition of the reason why the woman is cry can be deduced by the trigger language “only”: husband didn’t leave her any money, valuables and other necessities of life, so the woman is very sad. But the woman’s to explanation “thirty million” is not in the friend's cognitive scope, therefore, the friend did not have the correct understanding of the woman's presupposition. This message’s humor is mainly caused by the woman’s treating the ambiguous “thirty million” as common information of both sides in the communication.

Presupposition conflict produced by the negative impact of the context. The appropriateness of pragmatic presupposition refers to the combination of presupposition and context. Presupposition is the precondition of verbal behavior. But sometimes the context can mislead people's cognition, and the presupposition and conflict of facts which based on the wrong cognition make people laugh.

E.g., on a midnight, a woman got on a taxi from the funeral home’s gate. The driver just took out an apple to eat, and the woman said: “I used to eat apple when I sheng (had life).” The driver suddenly froze, “but I dislike it after sheng hai zi (give birth to a child).”

The word “sheng” has many meanings in Chinese: alive—which is contradict with “dead” and “sheng hai zi”—which relate to child’s birth. Dark night and stormy atmosphere would already give people a feeling of terror, and the woman is out of the funeral home said “I used to eat apple when I sheng (had life)” in this way. People who read text messages in this context, just like the driver, will naturally take the meaning of “alive”, make the presupposition that the woman have died and the person on the car is a ghost. But the presupposition is canceled after people listened to the rest words. Restricted by the context, people who read text messages were mistakenly took the meaning of “alive”, make the wrong presupposition, produces the humorous effect.

Conclusion

The entertainment message of mobile is a language problem, which concerns all aspects of life and contains a wealth of cultural knowledge and linguistic knowledge. The Pragmatics research the relationship between symbols and their users, emphasizes on the dynamic discourse, so it is feasible to discuss the mechanism of interpretation from the perspective of pragmatic humor. A small part of humor understanding mechanism is analyzed from the perspective of presupposition in this essay, many messages’ humor can also be analyzed from the perspective of Conversational Implicature, the theory of relevance etc.

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