

A Cognitive Study of Puns in China Daily News Headlines from the Perspective of Conceptual Blending Theory

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Abstract: The puns in English news headlines highlight the associative rhetorical effect of news headlines with their concise, vivid, implicit, and humorous features. With the help of conceptual blending theory and the use of conceptual blending network, the article explores the relevant psychological mechanisms when readers understand *China Daily* news headline puns from the cognitive perspective. The cognitive interpretation of headline puns from the perspective of conceptual blending theory enriches the cognitive research on the language of news headlines, and is also conducive to the readers' propiate comprehension and construction of the meaning of news headline puns, thus deepening their understanding of the content and theme of news reports.

1. Introduction

The headline is the epitome of the content of an article, which is characterized by conciseness, novelty and strong objectivity. In addition to condensing the theme, news headlines should also be vivid and refreshing, stimulating readers' interest and desire to read. In order to achieve this goal, various media reporters and editors strive to use various rhetorical devices to enhance the artistic appeal and dissemination effect of the title language when formulating news headlines. Among numerous rhetorical devices, puns are highly favored. As a common rhetorical device, puns can express double meanings in one word, thus giving the rhetorical object a vivid, humorous and profound language style. Therefore, from the perspective of readers, it is crucial to correctly understand and construct the meaning of puns in news headlines in order to grasp the content and main idea of news reporting.

For centuries, English puns are the concern of many rhetoricians and linguists. A lot of analyses and researches have been made on it, and quite a number of approaches have been adopted for the study of puns. These approaches will be classified into rhetorical, semantic, pragmatic and cognitive approaches. As a kind of rhetorical device, English pun has triggered the interest of many scholars, and relative theories concerning about English puns thrive. Most scholars consider English puns as a play of words. The Chinese scholar Feng Cuihua^[1] defines pun as a play of words, or a play of word forms and meanings for the sake of humorous effect. As for the study from the pragmatic perspective, a lot of literatures are devoted to English puns. Based on Grice's four conversational maxims, Geis^[2] puts forward six maxims, namely, the Maxim of Strength, the Maxim of Parsimony, the Maxim of Truth, the Maxim of Evidence, the Maxim of Relevance, and the Maxim of Clarity in The Language of Television Advertising. Most of the studies of English puns from cognitive perspective are based

on relevance theory. Lin Yan^[3] analyzes the puns employed in written advertisements within the framework of pragmatics and explains the functions of punning in the communication between the advertiser and the audience. However, former classifications of English puns have not touched on the basic meaning construction process. Besides, the exploration of the two meanings of English puns stays at the stage of ideal situation. The causes for meaning misunderstanding and incomprehension under the influence of context have not been well explained yet. This article attempts to use the conceptual blending theory proposed by cognitive linguists such as Fauconnier and Turner, and apply the conceptual blending network to explore the relevant psychological mechanisms of readers in understanding puns in news headlines from a cognitive perspective, that is, what cognitive programs run in people's brains to understand the author's implied meaning, in order to deepen readers' understanding of the content and theme of the report.

2. Conceptual Blending Theory

Conceptual Blending Theory sprang up in 1985 with the publication *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language* written by Gilles Fauconnier. Conceptual blending is a model of cognitive operations concerning linguistic phenomena. It is believed that the construction of meaning is the result of the conceptual blending network in which four mental spaces mapping and integrating each other. Blending theory suggests that the basic unit of cognition is the mental space. Conceptual blending networks, on the other hand, were explored and developed by Fauconnier and Turner in a series of books and articles^{[4][5][6]}. The network model consists of four mental spaces: i.e., two input spaces, a generic space and a blended space. In conceptual blending, the two input spaces are connected correspondingly by cross-space mapping, producing a third space, the generic space. The generic space contains the abstract organization and structure common to the two input spaces, i.e. the universal structure, which determines the mapping of the two input spaces to each other as well as the projection to the blended space. When the two input spaces are partially projected to the fourth space, i.e., the blended space, the blended space generates the emergent structure through the interaction of three cognitive mental processes: composition, completion, and elaboration. The process of generating an emergent structure that is different from the original input space is the process of transporting and constructing meaning. Therefore, the conceptual integration network is a dynamic model that reveals the dynamic nature of the meaning construction process, as is illustrated in Figure 1.

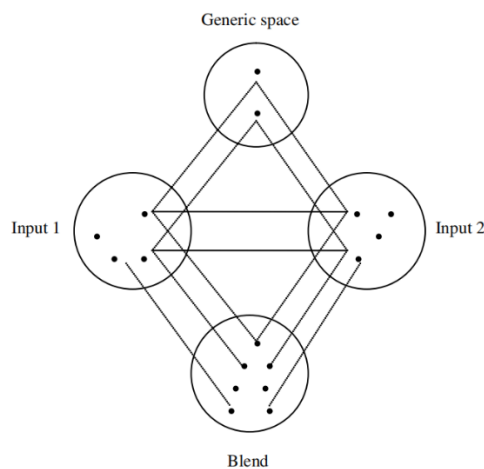


Figure 1: A basic integration network (adapted from Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 46).

Conceptual blending is the basic cognitive process of language use. It is this conceptual blending network that people systematically use to construct meaning online, as they continuously build up

mental spaces while talking and thinking, and then map between mental spaces to synthesize new spaces and structures. Conceptual blending theory has great cognitive explanatory power and can be used to explain many linguistic phenomena such as semantic use, grammatical structure and pragmatic presuppositions. This paper argues that the theory can also explain the process of interpreting news headline puns, dynamically reproducing the cognitive process of readers' comprehension of news content and themes and construction of new meanings.

3. Cognitive Interpretation of Puns in News Headlines Based on Conceptual blending Theory

3.1 Puns in *China daily's* news headlines

The establishment of puns requires two conditions: the coexistence of dual contexts that can each be justified and the intersection between the dual contexts. The dual contexts of puns are explicit and implicit contexts. In terms of headline puns, the explicit context is the context in which the literal meaning of the news title is established, and the implicit context is the context in which the deeper meaning of the title is reflected in the author's true intentions. In addition to the dual contexts that must be present in a pun, there must also be a point of intersection between the explicit and implicit contexts, i.e., the punning word itself. In order to obtain the use of puns in *China daily's* news headlines, this paper uses the Lexisnexis corpus as a search platform, and retrieves 55 news reports from January 15, 2023 to February 5, 2023 with "Spring Festival Travel Rush" as keywords. Among them, there are 23 articles with puns in their headlines, which are categorized as shown in Table 1. According to the compositional characteristics of punning words, this paper believes that news headline puns in general can be divided into four kinds of phonetic, semantic, grammatical and idiomatic puns.

Table 1: Puns in *China daily's* news headlines.

Categories	Number
Phonetic puns	3
Semantic puns	12
Grammatical puns	6
Idiomatic puns	2

3.2 Phonetic Puns

Phonetic puns are also called harmonic puns. Phonetic puns are words or phrases that have the same or similar pronunciation, but not the same meaning^[7]. The use of puns in news headlines is mainly to increase interest and readability.

(1) 'Train doctors' keep Gansu on route to fast-track growth.

This article mainly tells that during the Spring Festival, train doctors still took root in Gansu and helped its economy grow rapidly.

This news utilizes the pun of route to construct a dual context, where "route" and "root" are homophonic. The input space 1 established in our brain that is related to the literal meaning of the title is: train doctors to keep Gansu's economy on track for rapid development. It mainly includes three elements: a(train doctors), b(on route), and c(fast track growth). After skimming the article, we will find that it highlights the contribution of train doctors, who give up the opportunity to reunite with their families and stay in the hospital. When rereading the title, readers can establish an input space related to the implicit context of the title in their minds. 2: Train doctors staying in hospitals during the Spring Festival period ensures that the economy of Gansu is on track. It mainly includes three elements: a'(train doctors), b'(on root), and c'(fast track growth).

By cross spatial mapping, corresponding connections a-a' and c-c' are established, and the common structure “object---event---result” relationship between the two input spaces is also extracted into the generic space. Through selective projection and conceptual integration, elements a-a' and c-c' merge with each other, while b and b' remain independent and jointly construct an emergent structure in the blended space. The true meaning of this news headline is that people should pay attention to the existence of train doctors, whose efforts have enabled Gansu's economy to continue to develop rapidly.

3.3 Semantic Puns

This type of pun utilizes the polysemous nature of words to create a double meaning, i.e., two different interpretations of the same word.

(1) Big jump in rail passengers over holiday.

The starting point of the report title is the surge in passenger numbers at Guangdong stations during the Spring Festival. When browsing the title, its literal meaning is easy to understand, while “jump” means “sudden increase”. Therefore, the content of input space 1 related to the explicit context of the title is: the rapid increase in passengers at Guangdong stations during the Spring Festival. Input space 1 includes 3 elements: a (big jump), b(rail passengers). But when we read the article again with the pictures, we can see that the article also shows the joy of passengers returning home. The passengers in the picture of the article are all beaming with happy smiles, and the children are bouncing towards the platform. Therefore, the jump in the title can also be understood as “bounce”. So, the elements contained in input space 2 related to the implicit context of the title are: a'(big bounce), b'(in passengers).

By cross spatial mapping, two input spaces establish corresponding connections between elements b and b', and their shared structure of “action actor” relationship is reflected in the generic space. Then, through projection and conceptual integration, some elements merge with each other, such as bb', while others remain independent, such as a and a'. This creates an emergent structure in the synthetic space: more and more people are happily taking trains back to their hometowns at Guangzhou Station. At this point, the interpretation of the pun in the title has been achieved. The author cleverly used the pun “jump” to make the news title more intriguing.

3.4 Grammatical Puns

Grammatical puns are puns that arise from grammatical relations. In a particular context, the speaker consciously allows the same word to be analyzed grammatically in more than one way at the same time, thus conveying a double message. Grammar puns are also commonly used in news headlines, and people usually choose words that are relatively simple and easy to discover their different grammatical functions.

(1) Everyday heroes arrive in a snap to keep holidays rolling.

In the news headline, the author cleverly utilizes the different parts of speech of every day, meaning “every day” when used as an adverb and “daily” when used as an adjective, in order to achieve a pun effect. When reading the title for the first time, we tend to have a preconceived understanding that “everyday” is an adjective, which means “every day”. Therefore, we interpret the title as “every day there are people who show bravery and righteousness, so that this Spring Festival can pass smoothly”. This is the input space 1 related to the explicit context of the title, which consists of four elements: a(everyday), b(heroes), c(arrive in a snap), and d(keep holidays rolling). After browsing the general content of the article, readers find that the report describes the efforts of some unknown heroes such as electricity workers, doctors, and traffic rescuers who ensure Spring Festival travel beats the cold. Therefore, after rereading the title and contacting the main content of the report, readers can establish

input space 2: some unknown people, like maintenance workers around us, ensure people's safety during the Spring Festival travel period. Input space 2 also contains four elements: a'(everyday), b'(heroes), c'(arrive in a snap), and d'(keep holidays rolling).

By cross spatial mapping, two input spaces establish corresponding connections between elements "everyday" (a) and "everyday" (a'), while the generic space extracts the common structure of the two spaces --- "actor---action---result". Then, through projection and conceptual integration, aa' remains independent and other elements merge with each other, creating an emergent structure in the blended space: every day, some people silently contribute to the country, ensuring people's safety during the Spring Festival travel period. People should cherish their efforts and express gratitude to them instead of taking it for granted. In this way, the meaning construction of puns can be realized, and the use of puns makes the title contain deeper meaning.

3.5 Idiomatic Puns

Such puns usually make use of familiar idioms or allusions to construct two contexts in which meaning is implied in the pun^[8]. The speaker consciously uses the semantic meaning of the word itself in relation to the specific topic to convey a double meaning.

(1) China's Spring Festival travel rush kicked off on Jan. 17.

This is a news headline that successfully uses the English idiom "kick off" as a pun to construct a dual context. Literally, kick off is an idiom that means "(soccer) kick off". Therefore, when reading the title for the first time, we will immediately construct a mental space in our brain for the start of a football game, namely input space 1, which mainly includes two elements: a(football) and b(kick off). After browsing the article, we found that the report stated that the Spring Festival travel rush began on January 17th. Therefore, "kick off" refers to the start of the Spring Festival travel rush rather than the start of football. Input space 2 related to implicit context is: the number of Spring Festival travelers suddenly increased on January 17th, containing two elements: a'(the number of Spring Festival travelers) and b'(begin to increase).

By cross spatial mapping, corresponding connections a-a' and b-b' are established, and the common structure "actor---event" relationship between the two input spaces is also extracted into the generic space. Through selective projection and conceptual integration, elements aa' merge with each other, while b and b' remain independent, jointly constructing an emergent structure in the blended space. This title means that just like the beginning of a football game, the start of the Spring Festival travel rush is also very sudden, and the number of people will rapidly increase in a short period of time. This emergent structure is not present in the original two input spaces, thus marking the ultimate emergence of new meaning.

4. Conclusion

This article is based on the theory of conceptual blending and analyzes the characteristics of puns in news headlines. By analyzing examples of puns in English news headlines, it delves into the cognitive construction process of puns in English news headlines. Through analysis, it can be seen that the cognition of English puns under the blending theory is a dynamic process and a psychological process of meaning construction. Readers integrate the implicit meaning in the title, then project it into reality, and ultimately understand the deep meaning contained in the title. At the same time, it also proves that conceptual blending theory is a cognitive method with great potential for development. But there are still many shortcomings in the article. Firstly, the amount of data is not large enough, and secondly, it would be better if a comparison could be made between Chinese and English.

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