

On Deconstruction of Linguistic Signs in Rhetorical Activities

—Taking Advertising Slogan as an Example

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Abstract—Deconstruction means breaking apart a fixed relation or structure and is one of the important characteristics in rhetoric. In rhetorical activities such as specific advertising slogans, deconstruction is mainly embodied in the following two aspects: one is breaking free the corresponding relation between “signifier” and “signified” that has been publicly accepted; the other is changing the collocation of relevant elements. In terms of breaking the corresponding relation between “signifier” and “signified”, it is achieved through changing the connotation of rational meaning and emotional meaning. Besides, irregular collocation and lexical deviation can lead to the changes in collocation of relevant elements. The thesis aims to enable readers to deepen their understanding of “deconstruction in linguistic signs” through analysis and exposition.

Keywords—Rhetorical Activity; Advertising Slogan; Linguistic Sign; Deconstruction

I. INTRODUCTION

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure had pointed out that “language is a system of signs” in the book *Course in General Linguistics*, which revealed the nature of language that language is a system of structural patterns. In the linguistic structure, the conventionalized relations between forms and meanings are the inner links between the two sides. These conventionalized relations are mainly embodied in two aspects: one is the corresponding relation between “signifier” and “signified” and the other is the collocation of relevant elements. In language research, if we go against this corresponding relation or collocation, the fixed language structures would be damaged, which means inaccuracy in language use or even making grammar mistakes.

Rhetorical activities mean that rhetors positively use languages and refer to a string of conducts of selecting, adjusting and polishing languages in the process of language use. Independent-minded rhetors are doomed to break previous codes of language as well as grammar rules and try hard to innovate in a bid to show their personalities and distinctiveness. That consciously break or go against conventionalized language structures is the deconstruction of linguistic signs in rhetorical activities.

The deconstruction in linguistic signs is one of the significant characteristics in rhetoric summarized by Mr. Yao Yaping in the book *Contemporary Studies on Chinese Rhetoric*. He held that deconstruction is to break apart a fixed relation or

structure. In rhetorical activities, deconstruction is mainly embodied in breaking the corresponding relations between “signifier” and “signified” and changing the collocation of relevant elements. As an important tool to spread information in today’s society, the rapid development of advertising business is not only a kind of economic phenomenon, but the language use in advertising slogans is a sort of cultural and rhetorical phenomenon. The thesis takes advertising slogans as an example and analyzes the deconstruction in linguistic signs from the two above-mentioned aspects.

II. BREAK THE CORRESPONDING RELATIONS BETWEEN “SIGNIFIER” AND “SIGNIFIED”

Linguistic sign has two aspects which are inseparably connected: the sound sequence (signifier) and the concept (signified). In this structure, the corresponding relation between sound and meaning is apparent and certain. But the fixed corresponding relations will be split apart deliberately by rhetors in rhetorical activities. The original meanings are accordingly changed and new meanings would be created, which produce unexpected impacts on language expression. After the corresponding relation between “signifier” and “signified” is set apart, the change of meaning will take different forms. According to the collected materials on advertising slogans, the changes in words’ meaning mainly take place in the following two situations:

A. The Rational Meaning Changes

The main meaning or core meaning in the sense of a word, or the meaning related to expressing definitions, is defined as rational meaning. The rational meaning of some words in rhetorical activities will change, and due to various meanings of a word or the existence of homonym and homophone, these changes are mostly achieved in specific contexts.

1) Various Meanings Belonging to One Word will Lead to Changes in Meaning

It is an objective fact that a great number of polysemants exist in language system, and it is common to see a word have different meanings. A word can have several meanings, and each meaning will appear in a specific context where this meaning can accurately convey its intended meaning. The status of these different meanings is not equal, because generally speaking, at least one of these meanings is the mostly used in daily life. Therefore, when a certain word comes into a reader’s view, he or she is likely to conjure up the meaning that

is mostly used or the meaning the reader are most familiar with. However, in rhetorical activities, in a hope of pursuing something new or distinctive in language expression, rhetors will adopt the meaning that is seldom used on purpose to enhance the expressive force of language. The previous rational meanings of the word are changed. For example, the Chinese sentence “你为我打气，我为你撑腰” means the mutual encouragement and support between two individuals. “打气” carries the meaning of giving encouragement in English and “撑腰” means giving strong support in English. However, in a TV advertisement on waist supporters, the slogan “你为我打气，我为你撑腰” will have different meanings, because in this context, the meanings of the words “打气” and “撑腰” are defined as the basic or literal meaning instead of the metaphoric meaning. “打气” in the advertisement means increasing pressure to make air enter and “撑腰” means supporting the waist. The waist supporter is equipped with a manual air pump device. Users need to press to inflate by hand. After the inflation, it can support the waist and relieve the pressure of lumbar vertebra. Therefore, the advertising slogan should be understood that if users inflate the waist supporter and the waist supporter will support their lumbar vertebra, which is different from the common meaning. Taking advantage of the various meaning of words, we can split apart the corresponding relation between “signifier” and “signified”, in an effort to catch people’s eyes and arouse their interest. This is a common strategy used in many advertising slogans.

2) *The meaning of word changes due to homonym and homophone*

Homonym refers to the words with the same spelling or pronunciation but different meanings, and homophone refers to a word that sounds the same as another but is different in spelling and meaning. Despite that the existence of homophone will confused people sometimes and brings about negative effects on personal communication, the proper use of homophone can also have positive impacts and surprise readers and viewers. In Chinese, the Chinese character “面” are used in words like “面粉”, “面条”, “脸面” and “见面”. The Character delivers different meanings in the above-mentioned words, in this situation, the character “面” is a homonym. In the Chinese idiom “一面之交” the character “面” means meeting, and the meaning of the idiom means a once-met acquaintance and the two parties don’t have deep understanding of or friendship with each other. This meaning sometimes will be changed by rhetors deliberately. For example, a slogan printed at the flour package bags reads “一面之交，终生难忘” which means a once-met experience will impress you forever in English. In this context, the character “面” means flour or noodles. This slogan conveys a distinctive and impressive meaning without changing a character. The slogan formally borrows the Chinese idiom but the inner meaning has changed. This change depends on two points: one is that the character “面” has different meanings in Chinese; the other is that the Chinese character is used in a specific

context where an enterprise happens to run a business of flour processing.

B. *Emotional Meanings Change*

Emotional meaning is a very important part in language expression. It is permeated in the rational meaning. Generally speaking, emotional meaning is fixed, but it is changed in some rhetorical activities. According to advertising slogans collected so far, such a change is reflected in two situations: derogatory terms used as neutral words and derogatory terms used as commendatory terms.

1) *Derogatory Terms Used as Neutral Words*

Derogatory terms refer to words that speakers deny, rebuke, hate and belittle someone or something. In rhetorical activities, the emotions of denial and denouncement in some derogatory terms will disappear in specific contexts, and it turns out that the derogatory terms are changed into neutral words. For example, people often consider the Chinese idiom “吃不了兜着走” (bear all the consequences in English) as “causing disturbance by ignoring the general situation or causing negative effects and bearing the consequences”. This is an extended meaning in Chinese instead of literal meaning, showing a touch of warning and threatening or even derogatory sense to some extent. However, in rhetorical activities, rhetors sometimes do not use the extended meaning on purpose, but use the literal meaning so as to achieve a specific goal and realize the desired effect. Since 2013, people who have been devoted in promoting public good launched the campaign of “光盘行动” (clearing the plate in English) and went against extravagance and waste. They advocated thrift and encouraged people to leave the restaurant without any leftovers. Since then, lots of restaurants and hotels positively responded to this campaign and posted the advertising slogan “请吃不了兜着走”. They just used the literal meaning, hoping that people can take away the leftovers when they eat out. In this way, the obvious derogatory sense turned into the neutral sense.

2) *Derogatory Terms Used as Commendatory Terms*

In rhetorical activities, the emotions of denial and denouncement in some derogatory terms will change in specific context, and turn into commendatory terms that show speakers’ affirmation, praise, love and compliment someone or something. For instance, “表面文章” (specious writing in English) is explained in Modern Chinese Dictionary as “things that have good-looking form, but have no essential contents and do not seek practical results.” The given example is “to insist in seeking truth from facts and don’t do things based on superficial reasons. “Refuse specious writing” is deserved to be affirmed and advocated, and carries commendatory meaning. Similarly, “only focusing on specious writing” shall be rejected. However, when advertiser used “Focusing on appearance” as the advertising slogan of Monkey King Coating, its emotions turn into the commendatory meaning, because this advertising slogan aimed to highlight key functions of Monkey King Coating and to speak highly of its coating that can make the objects’ surface more good-looking.

III. SPLIT APART THE COLLOCATION OF RELEVANT ELEMENTS

“Collocation” means to arrange and adjust the sequence of languages in line with certain requirements and rules. Collocation between linguistic signs has a set of strict requirements. In general, sequence between linguistic signs and basic format of language are publicly accepted, in order to ensure all people in the society to use certain languages smoothly. The linguistic feature follows such a rule. However, rhetors sometimes will deliberately break the collocational habits or deviate from collocational norms, and create a new collocational relation in rhetorical activities, in an attempt to gain unexpected results. According to the collected materials on advertising slogans, the elements of collocation split apart are mainly embodied in the irregular collocation and lexical deviation:

A. Irregular Collocation

The academic circles generally study the irregular collocation from the perspectives of semantics and grammar. In this thesis, the author narrates how to create the irregular collocation by using rhetorical device.

1) Transferred Epithet

A transferred epithet is a little known—but often used—figure of speech where a modifier (usually an adjective) qualifies a noun other than the person or thing it is actually describing. Generally speaking, the words used to modify another word is not suitable for such a modification, and it is an irregular collocation in specific context. For example, in an advertising slogan of shampoo “让快乐的头发飘起来” (let the happy hair flutter in English), happy hair is an irregular collocation. Happy is an adjective to be used to modify humans and here was used to modify hair. It seemed that hair had human emotion and consciousness. Besides, an advertising slogan of a beauty product “say goodbye to gloomy wrinkles”. “Gloomy” is a descriptive adjective. In general, it is used to modify humans and to show the people are in a low spirit. It is a method to express emotions towards objects for special feeling of human mentality.

Such a transferred epithet transferred human emotions to objects and vividly reveals people’s emotional state of being happy for fluttering hair and being gloomy for various wrinkles. In this way, authors injected strong subject feelings into the described objects and meanwhile enabled consumers to better understand the relations between human’s emotions and the targeted objects. The use of transferred epithet can make the irregular collocations more concise and vivid.

2) Taking Advantage of Zeugma

Zeugma is a rhetorical term for the use of a word to modify or govern two or more words although its use may be grammatically or logically correct with only one. Given that the word used in Zeugma is often not suitable for the modified word, rhetors simply take advantage of the specific context to use the targeting word to modify another word and therefore, an irregular collocation is created. For example, the advertising slogan of Shangling refrigerator “买上菱，就是买放心” means when consumes purchase Shangling refrigerators they

can rest their hearts because of the high-quality of commodities. Besides, another advertising slogan of a book “买《××》，就是买一位大师一生的智慧” which means buy this book, and you get the lifelong wisdom of a master in English. Through Zeugma, consumers could buy “放心” (resting one’s heart) and “智慧” (wisdom). The verb “买” (buy) can be followed by “放心” and “智慧”, which is a kind of irregular collocation. The most obvious characteristics of Zeugma is that the same verb often appears in two sequential sentences and the two objectives in the two sentences have different natures and belong to different categories. Generally speaking, in Chinese language, the verb can be collocate with the objective in the first half of the sentence, such as buy refrigerators and buy books, and the verb and the other objective in the latter part of the sentence could form an irregular collocation, such as buy “resting one’s heart” and buy “wisdom”. This rhetorical technique makes use of the context and put the regular collocation and irregular collocation together, which can effectively attract consumers’ attention and deepen the impression on consumers’ minds. The irregular collocation with symmetrical structure created by Zeugma can enable consumers to generate deeper association and get concise and vivid rhetorical effect.

B. Lexical Deviation

Grammatically, each type of word can be suitable for certain context, which means each type of word has its own functions. But sometimes in need of language expression, some words will violate the grammatical rules and appear in the context where another type of words often appear. Therefore, these words temporarily possess the main features and functions of another type of words, which is what we often call “flexible usage of the words’ nature” or lexical deviation. According to the current collected materials on advertising slogans, this deviation is mainly manifested by using adjectives as verbs and using nouns as adjectives in Chinese.

1) Using Adjectives as Verbs

Verbs and adjectives share something in common and also have difference in grammar functions and the most distinction is that verbs can be followed by objectives but adjectives won’t. For example, the Chinese word “凉爽”, cool in English, is an adjective and cannot be followed by objectives. But in the advertising slogan designed by Tmall in the summer of 2017, the word “凉爽” in the sentence “炎炎夏日，用红包凉爽你的夏天” has been used as a verb and was collocated with the objective “your summer”. The language was polished in a natural and vivid way, and this sort of expression not only added dynamic state into the slogan and highlighted the persistent coolness in summer. In addition, another advertising slogan in a makeup advertisement reads “白嫩你的肌肤” (means the cosmetics can lighten your skin in English). The adjective word “白嫩” is used as a verb. Similar examples can be seen “文明你的语言，优雅你的举止” (means pay attention to your words and behaviors in English), and the word “文明” (civilized) and “优雅” (elegant) are used as verbs in Chinese. These language expressions can reveal the dynamic

nature of language and highlight the continuity of verbs. This innovation in language use can make the advertising slogan more eye-catching.

2) *Nouns Used as Adjectives*

Nouns and adjectives have big difference in grammar functions. For example, adjectives are closely linked to adverbs and adjectives can be modified by adverbs of degree and negative adverbs, but we cannot put an adverb ahead of a noun. According to grammar rules, McDonald's is a noun that cannot follow adverbs such as "very", "no" or "often". But in the McDonald's Chinese slogans, we can often see expressions like "Often smile and often McDonald's" (the original Chinese version is "常常欢笑, 常常麦当劳"). The McDonald's was used as an adjective and was collocated with adverbs of frequency "often" and temporarily possessed the grammar function of adjectives. In this advertising slogan, the nature of McDonald's has been shifted from a noun to an adjective and stressed the "happiness" feature that McDonald's enjoyed. Consumers could associate happiness with having meals at McDonald's. This language use highlights human's or objects' nature and characteristics and enhance the expressive force of language. Proper use of lexical deviation can attract people's

attention, create much more room for consumers to imagine and leave deep impressions on advertisement viewers.

IV. CONCLUSION

The thesis mainly focuses on two embodiments of deconstruction in linguistic signs in advertising slogans, and gives a detailed analysis of every aspect, in a bid to enable readers to have a deeper understanding of deconstruction in linguistic signs.

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