

Popular Etymology and Analogous Separable Words

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ABSTRACT

The paper, by comparing and summarizing the classic definitions of the popular etymology in China and abroad, points out the features distinguishing the popular etymology from other language phenomena: the old form and the old meaning are obscure; the old form is interpreted with the known form or meaning; the new interpretation is the distortion of the old meaning, resulting in the “deformation” of the old meaning or the old form; the “distortion” will “pass into common usage”. The paper further reveals the fundamental nature of the popular etymology — a phenomenon of semantic change with anti-lexicalization as the key part of the changing process. By adopting the features and the nature to define the popular etymology and comparing analogous separable words with typical popular etymologies, the research concludes that the irregular analogous structure, of which the irregular analogous separable word is a typical type and can be categorized into the popular etymology. The semantic change occurs in the irregular analogous separable word, which also reveals the anti-lexicalization of the popular etymology. The finding shows that some language phenomena that are not considered as the popular etymology actually share the same essential features, which means the popular etymology covers a wider range of language phenomena than usually thought.

Keywords: popular etymology, semantic change, anti-lexicalization, analogous separable word

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the popular etymology was proposed by German scholars. Saussure spent a whole session of his lectures on the popular etymology. He defines the popular etymology that “it sometimes happens that we get a word wrong when we are not very sure of its form and meaning: and sometimes the deformations pass into common usage”, “however bizarre such innovations may be, they do not occur haphazardly”, “they are attempts to make some kind of sense of an embarrassing word by connecting it with something known”. [1] Saussure’s definition reveals the essence, acceptability and major relevant objects of the popular etymology. He also elaborates the generation of the popular etymology. The memory is the basis of the popular etymology, “the memory of the old form, confused though it may be” is the “the point of departure for the distortion”; the language user “utilizes significant elements provided by the language” to produce “purely and simply misunderstood forms which have been reinterpreted in terms of known forms”; the word with new interpretations often changes its form to “accommodate it to elements supposedly recognized in it”; or it may not change its form or pronunciation, but reveals the new interpretation through changing its written form. [1] Bloomfield makes a similar definition: “an irregular or semantically obscure form is replaced by a new form of more normal structure

and some semantic content — though the latter is often far-fetched.” [2] He puts forward that “popular etymologies are largely adaptive and contaminative”. Adaptation generates “a new form, which is based on a traditional form, but departs it in the direction of a series of semantically related forms”, while “contamination” implies “only a single form which exercises the attraction”. [2] The study of Bloomfield explores into the causes of the popular etymology. The works of Saussure and Bloomfield laid the foundations for and shed light on the following researches on the popular etymology.

Chinese scholars learn from foreign linguistic theories to define and study popular etymologies in Chinese language. Zhang systematically studies popular etymologies in Chinese language and points out their features. He defines the popular etymology as “a kind of deformation of words in the development of language; the deformation is mainly caused by the change of the internal forms of words; the essential feature of the deformation is that words acquire new internal forms under the premise of homophony in the development of language ... due to various reasons, the internal form may separate and depart from the phonetic form; people, in order to meet their needs, substitute new internal forms for the lost or obscure internal forms, or create new internal forms to replace the original ones.” [3] Shao & Zhang reviewed the previous literatures and “made a typical definition of the popular etymology”: “a word may

lose its etymology in history or become obscure in borrowing from other languages; people tend to rebuild its etymological structure from the perspective of sound, shape and meaning. After that, the popular etymology spread widely in oral or written language, and gradually became standardized; that is to say, the etymology of the word is reshaped"; what's more, not all popular etymologies are as typical as mentioned above. [4]

It can be summarized that the important definitions of the popular etymology at home and abroad mainly include the following points: first, the old form and the old meaning are obscure; second, the old form is interpreted with the known form or meaning; third, the new interpretation is the distortion of the old meaning, resulting in the "deformation" of the old meaning or the old form; fourth, the "distortion" will "pass into common usage".

Many language phenomena can thus be regarded as the popular etymology. Harley includes back-formation in the popular etymology as one of its subcategories. [5] The irregular analogous separable word can also be included in the popular etymology. The paper will discuss it.

II. THE SEMANTIC CHANGE OF THE POPULAR ETYMOLOGY

The old meaning of a popular etymology can be completely forgotten, while the old form cannot. The memory of the old form is the "basis" and "the point of departure for the distortion", the popular etymology "is an interpretation of the old form". [1] The old form of the popular etymology may not change, which can be easily found in popular etymologies in Chinese language. Because of the many homophones in Chinese language, the phonetic change of the popular etymology is not so common in Chinese language as in western languages.

The popular etymology certainly brings about new interpretations, which means the change of meaning. The conceptual meaning though sometimes remains unchanged. In Leach's seven types of lexical meanings, the conceptual meaning (also known as the denotative meaning or the cognitive meaning) is the basic lexical meaning in communication; it is included in the dictionary and reflects or generalizes the object. [6] As long as the semantic relationship between morphemes changes, other aspects or types of the lexical meaning will change. The change of the internal form of the popular etymology mentioned in the previous section refers to the same case.

The change of the morpheme will result in the change of the lexical meaning. The meaning of the popular etymology cannot remain unchanged if its form changes. The popular etymology is by nature a phenomenon of semantic change. First of all, the old meaning of a word or morpheme became obscure or even disappeared; this is regarded as the premise of the generation of the new

meaning. Next, the old form in memory (usually the phonetic form that can be obscure) is associated with other known homophonic morphemes; this is the basis to generate the new meaning. Last, the new meaning is generated and the distortion of the meaning is caused; this is the nature or essence of the popular etymology. The new meaning may bring with it a new phonetic or written form; this is the influence of the new meaning. This accords to Strazny's definition of the popular etymology as "a change in a word or phrase, the substantial parts have become incomprehensible, and as such is reanalyzed with morphemes that are meaningful." [7]

III. THE ANTI-LEXICALIZATION OF THE POPULAR ETYMOLOGY

The obscurity or disappearance of the old meaning in the popular etymology will threaten the integrity and stability of the word and lead to "anti-lexicalization", which make possible the semantic composition operation between morphemes, as well as the generation of the new meaning. According to Brinton & Traugott, the popular etymology can be taken as anti-lexicalization. Anti-lexicalization refers to being from more to less lexical on the continuum of lexicality and changing from simplex to compound and derivative and to fixed phrase. Anti-lexicalization means a higher level of compositionality. [8] "In folk etymology a form is made more transparent whose morphological and semantic structure has become opaque...Folk etymology creates an analyzable, complex form from what has become an unanalyzable simplex; the meaning thus becomes more compositional, and changes in phonetic form lead to increased morphological structure, hence increased morphological compositionality." [8]

Being less lexical and having a more transparent form enhances the compositionality of a lexical structure. People can reanalyze the old form, associate it with the known homophones and generate the new meaning through certain mechanisms. The more obscure the old meaning is, the less lexical the word is, the more possible the semantic composition operates. If the old meaning is completely lost, a new conceptual meaning may be composed and generated. If the meaning of the morpheme is obscure but the lexical meaning still remains, the semantic relationship between the morphemes will change, and so will the other aspects of the lexical meaning.

IV. THE IRREGULAR ANALOGOUS SEPARABLE WORD

"The structural paradigmatic relation is formed by compounds of similar structures;. In language use, the wrong classification of paradigmatic relation, which means compounds of different structures are classified into one type, results in peculiar structural deformation or strange analogical elements." [9] The peculiar deformed

structure is called the irregular analogous structure. The irregular analogous structure is mainly caused by “the semantic correlation (such as the influence of the synonyms or the words of the same kind in the same semantic field)”, “compounds of similar or relevant meaning are identified as compounds of similar structure, which leads to the wrong classification of the structural paradigmatic relation”. [9]

The irregular analogous separable word is a typical irregular analogous structure. “Because of the consistency of the relationship between the sentence structure and the word structure, the sentence structure sometimes affects the word structure. Some syntactic elements are inserted into words and turn the words into phrases; this kind of structures are called ‘the separable word’. Most separable words are verb-object or verb-complement compounds. However, in language use, due to the influence of the structural relations of other words in the same paradigmatic relation, people wrongly analyze the structure between morphemes of the compound and mistake the syntactic structure of the disyllabic word as the verb-object separable structure, which is called the irregular analogous separable word.” [9]

The irregular verb-object structure and other structures alike share the following features: the former component remains unchanged while the latter changed; the former changed and the latter unchanged; both change. The following essential factors result in the change into the separable verb-object structure from other structures. The word, usually the content word, occupying the key syntactic position of a sentence can be separated into smaller parts as a phrase. The word, usually the verb, is intransitive often without an object or complement following behind. The former component morpheme is more like a verb with strong transitivity and apparent meaning, while the meaning of the latter component is obscure or it can function as a nominal morpheme. The unknown structure looks similar or relevant to some known verb-object structure and share some common or homophone morphemes with the latter. Because of analogy, the former morpheme is taken as a verb and the latter is reanalyzed as a noun, which turns the word into a verb-object phrase.

If the separable word is of the verb-complement structure, some function words like auxiliaries or negations can be inserted to separate the components apart. Some irregularity can be found in those verb-complement separable words. Numerals and unit words can be inserted into such words to separate the verb from the complement and make some structures difficult to explain in grammar. Besides, some coordination compounds can undertake such change.

V. THE IRREGULAR ANALOGOUS SEPARABLE WORD AS THE POPULAR ETYMOLOGY

According to the key points to define the popular etymology mentioned in the previous section, the irregular analogous structure, with the irregular analogous separable word as the typical type, can be categorized into the popular etymology. It reveals the major features of the popular etymology, which are the semantic change and the anti-lexicalization.

A. *The semantic change*

In the irregular analogy, the wrong classification of structural relations (like syntactic structures) is caused by the misjudgment of the word class of the component. The part of speech is related to and affected by the meaning of the morpheme. The change of the word class of the component leads to the change of the syntactic structure of the word, which means at least one part or aspect of the lexical meaning is changed. The wrong classification of the syntactic structure therefore means the distortion of the old meaning. The distortion is sometimes not apparent and revealed through the change of the grammatical meaning and the like instead of the lexical meaning.

The wrong classification is caused by mistaking a structure as another. A known structure is applied to interpret another relevant structure whose meaning is obscure. Irregular analogous structures, at least some of them, are like popular etymologies. In both phenomena, known forms help to interpret relevant forms whose meanings are obscure, which leads to the wrong classification of the structural paradigmatic relation and the distortion of the lost old meaning.

The nature or essence of the popular etymology is the change of the meaning. The new meaning, lexical or grammatical, generated through the change into the verb-object separable structure corresponds to the very nature of the popular etymology.

B. *The anti-lexicalization*

As mentioned above, Brinton and Traugott view the popular etymology as the anti-lexicalization. The irregular analogous separable word also reveals the feature of the anti-lexicalization. The meaning of the word was obscure. Its structure, becomes as decomposable as a phrase. The meaning becomes explicit to some extent for analysis. Because the structure is decomposable and unstable, other elements can be inserted into the structure. The word becomes separable. The separable word is less lexical and more like the phrase on the continuum of lexicality.

The irregular analogous separable word often function as the verb-object structure. The coordinate structure such as “kai-zhang” (开张) and “tiao-wu” (跳舞), the disyllabic simplex such as “hua-ji” (滑稽) and “you-mo” (幽默), and the verb-complement structure such as “chi-bao” (吃饱)

and “kan-gou” (看够) all change into the verb-object structure and then can be separated as a separable word.

C. The causes of the irregular analogous separable word

The change into verb-object separable words is partially attributed to the paradigmatic analogy. Influenced by the verb-object compounds of similar or relevant meaning in the same paradigmatic relation, the structure is mistaken and analyzed as the verb-object structure and separated as the separable word. If words of relevant meanings are mostly of the verb-object structure, people tend to draw an analogy between the unknown structure with those more familiar words. The unknown structure might be therefore distorted as of the verb-object structure. These influencing factors are outside the word structure.

Factors within the word structure also influence the analogy of the verb-object structure. The former component morpheme of the structure is more like a verb with strong transitivity and apparent meaning, while the meaning of the latter is obscure or it can function as a nominal morpheme. The certain features within the structure and of the components also help to cause the change into the verb-object structure.

The change into the verb-object structure also sees the semantic composition or semantic transformation of the components in their mutual combination. The meaning of the component departs from the old meaning. The word generates the new meaning.

The old meaning of some words or components becomes obscure due to the age and loan from other languages. People lack the adequate knowledge of the etymology and are influenced by psychology such as analogy when using such words. They tend to reanalyze the words with the help of their common sense about the language. If a component is reanalyzed as a verb, the word may be reanalyzed as a verb-object structure.

The popular etymology, such as the irregular verb-object separable word, is the anti-lexicalization from the word to the phrase. If the old lexical meaning is obscure, the new lexical meaning may be generated. If the old lexical meaning is clear, it usually remains unchanged while the new grammatical meaning may be generated. The new lexical meaning is often generated through the semantic generation mechanism that requires less effort. The generation of the grammatical meaning often requires more effort, in which the mechanism of semantic transformation might be applied. However, under the restriction of the old lexical meaning, the semantic transformation is not complete. The semantic type of the component will influence the generation of the new meaning either lexical or grammatical.

VI CONCLUSION

The popular etymology is by nature a phenomenon of semantic change. The irregular analogous structure can be categorized into the popular etymology. The irregular analogous separable word is a typical irregular analogous structure. The semantic change occurs in the irregular analogous separable word, which also reveals the anti-lexicalization of the popular etymology.

Some Language phenomena that are not considered as the popular etymology actually share the same essential features. The popular etymology covers a wider range of language phenomena than we thought. The popular etymology constitutes a bigger and more significant part of language change. Studies on the popular etymology help interpret the process of language change. Some causes of language change are shown and proven in the occurrence of the popular etymology.

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