

The Study on Homophony in Chinese Diet Culture from the Theory of Internal Lexicon

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Abstract. Homophony is a widespread phenomenon prevalent in Chinese language. It has already penetrated every corner for people's lives. And the research on homophony is of great significance. This paper makes a comprehensive analysis on homophonic phenomenon in Chinese diet culture, and it looks for some linguistic data, guided by the theory of internal lexicon.

Keywords: Homophony; Chinese Diet Culture; Theory of Internal Lexicon.

1. Introduction

Homophony refers to a type of lexical ambiguity in which two or more expressions have an identical pronunciation but different spellings and meanings (Bussmann, 2000). For example, deer and dear are both pronounced /diə/, however, they have totally different meanings. In the context of Chinese language, it indicates the words enjoy the same or similar pronunciation but different spellings and meanings.

Homophony is a widespread phenomenon existed in various kinds of languages in the world. Homophony in Chinese language, however, is the one of most prevalent and intriguing facts. Whether the spoken language in daily life or the written language on formal occasions, people in walks of life are fond of employing homophonic words to tactfully convey their internal thoughts and emotion. What's more, it could even reach the effects of humor and irony in certain specific situations. Therefore, it could easily be concluded that homophonic phenomenon has already penetrated into every corner for people's lives. And the research on homophony is of great significance in reality.

This paper makes a comprehensive analysis on homophonic phenomenon in Chinese diet culture, and it looks for some linguistic data, guided by the theory of internal lexicon.

2. The Theory of Internal Lexicon

2.1 The Definition and Features

Internal Lexicon, also called Mental Lexicon, is known as the organization of word knowledge in permanent memory (Carroll, 1999). In a semantic network, words are represented as nodes and are connected via relations to other words in the network.

The internal lexicon is the study of how words are stored in memory and how they are retrieved. Unlike traditional dictionaries, the internal lexicon is dynamic. This means that tiny messages at any moment have the potential to trigger and ignite the infinite association of the brain, but not at the mercy of consciousness.

2.2 Organization of the Internal Lexicon

Until now, psychologists have put forward many models of organizational structures. However, Spreading Activation Model proposed by Collins and Loftus (1975), remains the most convincing version in people's mind. The two scholars suppose that words are represented in the internal lexicon in a network, but the organization is not strictly hierarchical. On the contrary, the organization is closer to a web of interconnecting nodes, with the distance between the nodes determined by both structural characteristics such as taxonomic relations and considerations such as typicality and degree of association between related concepts (Carroll, 1999).

When a single node is activated, it spreads quickly throughout the whole network in every direction, and the process of spreading activation emerges. The more closely related concepts are, the more likely nodes are activated, the easier they are retrieved.

2.3 Lexical Access

It is defined as the process by which we activate the meanings from the speaker's lexicon. There are a number of variables that influence lexical access. Among such factors are the frequency of the word, its morphological complexity, its syntactic category, whether a semantically related word has just been encountered and whether the word is ambiguous. Associated with the contents of this paper, the study only concentrates on the effect of word frequency, which means that the frequency of the word is proportional to the probability of activation. That is, high-frequency words are more likely to be activated than low-frequency words.

2.4 Chunking

It is viewed as an assistant to memory. Chunking is a process by which individual pieces of information are bound together into a meaningful whole (Neath & Surprenant, 2003). Short-term memory has the capacity of approximately 7 ± 2 units of information, if unfamiliar concepts are combined to form a bundling and generate a new and connected meaning, it could greatly save space and achieve cognitive economy.

3. The Study of Homophony in Chinese Diet Culture

Case 1: the pronunciation "defu", the homophonic phenomenon of the advertisement of the brand Dove on 年年得福 (be blessed every year).

In Chinese culture, the word "blessing" represents people's infinite yearning for future life, as well as their heartfelt wishes for a better life. This is especially true at the dawn of the Spring Festival, a time when people are more looking forward to praying for happiness and auspiciousness. In the advertisement, the character "福" has been written 5 times, the wall is pasted by 20 the character "福", the wishes for be blessed every year is expressed at the beginning and the end of the advertisement, which, undoubtedly, exerts a far-reaching impression on the audience, more eager to possess happiness. Here, the advertisement cleverly uses homophony between the brand Dove and 年年得福, hoping to reach the resonance with the audience.

This prominent position of the character blessing rooted in a culture-centered feature in Chinese prompts the relative node receive more intensity of stimulus, easily activated than other nodes, needless to say, it has also been emphasized several time in the ad.. Here, the consumers do not simply purchase a commodity, but also a deep blessing for future life, whether eaten by themselves or sent to other relatives, the brand Dove becomes a superior choice. Furthermore, compared with the brand Dove, the word "blessing" is a high-frequency word.

Case 2: the pronunciation "xiaotidazuo", the homophony between the Xi'an restaurant brand 小蹄大作 and Chinese idiom "小题大做"(make a fuss over a trifle).

"小蹄大作" is a Xi'an restaurant which mainly features the selling of trotters and other food. Here, the merchant skillfully changes the characters of Chinese idiom, which has been known by almost every Chinese since childhood. In other words, brand 小蹄大作 originally contains 4 unrelated units, while, through chunking, the brand becomes a systematical unit, the idiom, which relieves the memory load. When selecting the potential restaurant of the same kind, this one would have more advantage to be considered.

In conclusion, chunking benefits people a lot in memorizing new information. Such as, 19820121, is 8 irregular number, tough to bear in mind. Nevertheless, if we associate it with a person's birthday, which falls on January, 21th, 1982, we would learn it by heart instantly.

Case 3: the homophony of Xi'an restaurant brand 好粥道 and the character 好周道, both should be pronounced as "haozhoudao" in Chinese.

The former is a Xi'an restaurant which features in selling various sorts of porridge, while the latter is a Chinese expression indicating attentive and thoughtful service. Obviously, the merchants give the brand on purpose. Unlike an ordinary restaurant brand, which may make the consumer feel strange and unfamiliar, the phrase of 周到, a fixed expression, is much easier to memorize. In addition, the brand subconsciously implies that the restaurant is not only selling porridge, more importantly, it provides considerate service, a vital factor of consumers in choosing the restaurant.

Here, the meaning of good service and the fixed expression would grab consumers' attention. Since the double connection makes the node in the internal lexicon have more energy to be activated, compared with the one-time, obscure and unfamiliar brands, which may jump out of the sensory memory and be filtered. Since, Chinese people, in general, are introverted, unwilling to expose their thoughts directly. Homophony provides an excellent channel to convey the perspectives. Also, it is the consumers themselves who make the inference of a nice environment, the indicated meaning of attentive service, it is more likely to exert a lasting impression on consumers.

4. Summary

In a nutshell, the storage and retrieval of information needs to integrate the entire internal lexicon. This kind of horizontal and vertical network connection is intertwined with each other, so that people's thinking spreads out in all directions. Only when the new information is associated with the old information that existed before, could construct a more stable connection. Hence, the speaker could bear it in mind, store it in the long run, and is efficient to activate and retrieve it. The homophonic phenomenon makes the unrelated semantic words blend with each other, relieve the pressure of brain memory and enhance the memory, so it is easy for the speaker to retrieve the information again. Therefore, association is the psychological basis of homophonic phenomenon.

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