

A Brief Analysis of Phonological Ambiguity in American Sitcom---Good Luck Charlie

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Abstract: Ambiguity is a widely existed language phenomenon, while phonological ambiguity is an important kind of ambiguity. Verbal communication lacks the visual aid of written text and the restriction of contextual information, which makes it possible for sentences that are not originally grammatical ambiguous to have multiple interpretations due to some phonological problems, resulting in ambiguity. This paper takes the American sitcom Good Luck Charlie as the research material, collates and analyzes several kinds of phonological ambiguity and its function in the play.

1. Introduction

Ambiguity (Ambiguity) is a unique phenomenon of language. There is ambiguity in any language, and English is no exception. For the definition of ambiguity, many scholars at home and abroad have made different elaboration from different angles. Ruth M.Kempson pointed out: "Words and sentences may contain more than one meaning."^[1] And Leech defines ambiguity as "one language item has more than one cognitive meaning".^[2] Chu Jun believes that ambiguity refers to a word, a phrase, a sentence or a group of sentences that are ambiguous can be interpreted in two or more ways."^[3] Wang Fengxin believes that a sentence with a vague meaning that can be understood in many ways can easily lead to ambiguity.^[4] From the above interpretations of ambiguity, it is obvious that ambiguity can be divided into grammatical ambiguity, syntactic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, phonological ambiguity and so on.

Since Saussure, many scholars at home and abroad have carried out a large number of research on language ambiguity. However, most of these studies focus on semantics, syntax, words and grammar, or on learning style rather than the pragmatic function of phonological ambiguity, an important part of ambiguity.

2. Phonological Ambiguity

Phonological ambiguity is an important part of ambiguity, which mainly occurs in spoken language. The main reason is that verbal communication lacks the visual aid of written text and the restriction of contextual information, which makes it possible for sentences that are not originally grammatical ambiguous to have multiple interpretations due to some phonological problems, resulting in ambiguity. Wu Qianguang believes that "phonological ambiguity is often caused by the continuous reading of words in sentences".^[5] WuJing, on the other hand, believes that "phonological ambiguity is due to continuous reading, homonym dissent, incomplete blasting and unclear stress position, which makes the hearer likely to have multiple understandings".^[6] Generally speaking, phonological problems such as homonymic dissent, continuous reading, phonetic variation, stress and intonation can lead to phonological ambiguity. phonological ambiguity is a widespread phenomenon in language, which sometimes causes misunderstanding in communication, hinders people's communication, and plays a negative role in verbal communication. And sometimes in order to achieve a certain effect, the deliberately arranged intentional ambiguity, if properly used, not only will not cause misunderstanding, but make the language lively, thus playing a positive role in communication.

3. The Types of Phonological Ambiguity in Good Luck Charlie

In recent years, some popular American sitcoms have gradually entered the vision of Chinese audiences. Some of these plays with the theme of youth and family life are very popular with college students, both in terms of ideas and English learning. However, due to cultural differences and language ability constraints, many people find it is difficult to understand some of the humorous jokes in these sitcoms. Good Luck Charlie is one of the most popular American sitcoms recently. It takes the American daily life as the background, tells the story between the Duncan family and the people around it. Most of the dialogue occurs in casual and informal situations, so there will be copious phonological ambiguity. A large number of humorous jokes in the play are also delivered through phonological ambiguity, so the study of phonological ambiguity in this play is helpful to further the understanding of American style humor and culture in sitcom. Therefore, it will guide people's cross-cultural communication. Good Luck Charlie broadcast four seasons, a total of 97 episodes, and each intensively lasting for 21 minutes. In this paper, 44 examples of phonological ambiguity are selected from 97 episodes and 2037 minutes of video materials. After careful analysis and comparison, the following types of phonological ambiguity are found in this American sitcom:

3.1 Ambiguity Caused by Homonyms

Homonyms are an important cause of phonological ambiguity. A large number of words in English are the same pronunciation and have two or more irrelevant meanings. Both homophones and homographs are homonyms.^[7] With the characteristic that pronunciation is the same and the meaning is different, homonyms are easy to cause phonological ambiguity in the daily verbal communication without word assistance. In the 24th episode of Good Luck Charlie, season 1, the younger son Gabe, in order to earn the money he spent on ordering room service, ran to work for the teacher, as the waiter, to deliver room service to the guests. The guest asked Gabe to "toss the salad", which means he should mix the salad well. Gabe, on the other hand, mistakenly took it for asking him to throw the salad high up. As a result and the salad was all over the floor, and they could not be eaten and Gabe ran away. In such a scene, of course, the audience burst out laughing.

In episode 13 of the third season, the mother of Duncuns', Amy returned to work in the hospital after giving birth to the youngster daughter, but she could not rest assured of her little daughter and son. When the hospital radio broadcast "Dr. Elliot to ICU!", Amy heard it as "I see you.", with the thought that her daughter was thinking about herself. Because the "ICU" pronunciation is the same as that of "I see you.", which causes ambiguity and makes Amy do a lot of funny moves later on.

3.2 Ambiguity Caused by Linking

Linking is a very important part of spoken English. It is to read the last sound of the previous word together with the first sound of the latter word in the group. In general, linking is required in the following situations: consonants+vowels, consonants+consonants, consonants+vowels, vowels+vowels. Due to the absence of written language, the above linking situation in spoken language can easily lead to ambiguity. In this American sitcom Good Luck Charlie, there are many such examples. For example, in the first season, Bob asked his eldest daughter Teddy to help take care of the younger sister, Charlie. Meanwhile, Teddy's boyfriend Spencer was just waiting to review lessons with her, so Teddy was very reluctant to do what her father asked. But there was no other way, so she said "Noookay!". The original intention was to express her dissatisfaction. But because of linking reading, Bob didn't understand Teddy's words. On the contrary, he thought Teddy was very willing to help, thus humorous effect was successfully achieved.

Another example is in the 30th episode of the second season. Teddy's good friend Ivy invited Teddy to go fishing with her parents in the family's country cabin. The main reason Ivy invited Teddy was that she thought it was a very boring activity and wanted Teddy to accompany her. When Teddy got there and saw the real little cabin, she asked "Ivy, you said it was a nice (pretty) house. Ivy replied" No, I said it was an ice (ice) house." It can be seen that Ivy deliberately made Teddy ambiguous about the invitation. And the purpose of this speech is precisely achieved by linking. Teddy can only be very speechless and helpless, then the comedy effect arises spontaneously.

3.3 Ambiguity Caused by Stress

English stress mainly has two categories, word stress and sentence stress. Word stress can help identify specific parts of speech and meaning, while sentence stress can indicate the speaker's specific intention and the information emphasized. Once the stress changes, speaker's meaning is bound to change subtly or dramatically, causing ambiguity in the understanding to the hearer. For example, in the second season, episode 22, Bob found a record he made when he was in high school. He excitedly told his elder son PJ "We made an album.". According to the rules of sentence stress, the stress of this sentence should be on the information words "made" and "album". But in Bob's speech, "an" was much stressed than two information words. Because Bob's intention is that the record he made was the only one. But PJ didn't understand the real stress. After accidentally had broke the only record, he said, "That...:that wasn't the only one, right?" Looking at Bob's bitter smile, and the audience already could not help laughing.

Another ambiguity caused by stress occurs in the 30th episode of the second season. When Teddy came back from travelling with Ivy's family to record video diary, she gave her sister an important lesson, "When someone says that they have a house on the lake, they might mean they have a house on the lake." Because when Ivy invited her, the stress of the sentence was on the words of "on" and "lake", but Teddy assumed that "house" and "lake" were the stressed words, therefore misunderstood the house on the lake as a lake house and went gladly, only to find out that it was a cabin on the frozen lake, and her expected fishing trip ended up as a suffering!

3.4 Ambiguity Caused by Sound Changes

In spoken English, phonological changes are also a very important part. Phonological changes occur in some specific syllables or between syllables due to the need for pronunciation. The main types of phonological changes are vowel weakening, consonant weakening or ellipsis, assimilation and turbidity.^[8] The main purpose of phonological change is to make the pronunciation smoother and labour-saving, but at mean time, some syllables are misunderstood by the hear because of the influence of adjacent sounds. In the fourth episode of the second season, Teddy and Ivy, for example, want to go to a reunion, but their mothers don't agree to let them go. In order to be able to make the trip, two girls played a little trick so that their mothers thought each other party agreed to let their daughter go to the party. When the scam was exposed, Teddy and Ivy came home obediently, and Teddy quoted an advertisement trying to make her Mom happy. When Amy quoted the advertisement word "Grape moms think alike.", the word "grape" here would be misunderstood as "great" because the consonant at the end of the word changed in tone due to the weakening and omission of consonants, which made "grape" ambiguous here. And this effect is exactly what Teddy wants to achieve: admit that her mom is very good and coax her happy! At the same time, it also achieved the effect of humorous and amusing the audience.

Then in episode 8, season 2, after Teddy and Ivy two good friends quarrelled, Ivy took a strawberry doll to Teddy house to apologize. Ivy first said the doll's name was "Berry Sowwy", its purpose was to deliberately make Teddy understand it as "very sorry", and the effect of indirect apology was produced by this example of sound change.

3.5 Ambiguity Cause by Intonation

Intonation refers to the change of tone in discourse. Different intonation will make a discourse produce different meanings. Intonation also helps make the meaning of discourse complete and clear. Content and expression together can form the complete meaning of discourse, but in many cases intonation can reflect the true meaning of discourse. If you cannot hear the implied meaning and the attitude of the speaker and, it will lead to misunderstanding and ambiguity. As in episode 26 of the first season, Teddy ran to her brother to complain about Bob's bad attitude when Bob taught her to drive "What is his problem?". She used a downward tone, indicating that Teddy was not really asking PJ the question, just trying to show her dissatisfaction. But PJ mistakenly thought he was asked a question about his father's problem, and honestly answered a lot.

In episode 2 of the third season, Gabe thought his parents would send him to a military school

for discipline, and went to PJ's room to discuss a solution. PJ said: "I'm not very good at thinking of things." His rising tone made Gabe think that he had a good idea, while PJ only meant that he was not good at thinking, which made Gabe happy and the comedy effect immediately appeared.

4. Concluding Remarks

The main purpose of sitcom is to make the audience laugh. In *Good Luck Charlie*, a large number of humorous jokes are realized by phonological ambiguity. After careful screening of 97 episodes and 2037 minutes of video materials, 44 examples of phonological ambiguity were selected. After repeated analysis and comparison, the five types of phonetic ambiguity in this American sitcom are summarized. It is helpful for Chinese audience to further understand American humor and culture and strengthen English learners' ability of understanding.

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