

A Study of the Generation of English Jokes From Cognitive Metonymy

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Abstract

English jokes improve human relations and enliven the communicative atmosphere in daily communication. How to generate English jokes has long been of interest to numerous researchers, such as philosophers, psychologists and linguists. In the linguistic field, the scholars at home and abroad have been discussing English jokes from angles of rhetoric, phonetics, semantics, pragmatics and cognitive linguistics. Few researchers study the generation of English jokes from cognitive linguistics. Therefore, this study implements a qualitative cognitive linguistic exploration into English jokes and proposes that the change of metonymy generates English jokes through the change of ICM (Idealized Cognitive Model). Then a framework of the generation of English jokes is proposed and applied to account for the generation of English jokes. As described in the proposed framework, in metonymy one, Conceptual entity one in ICM one provides mental access to conceptual entity two in ICM one. However, conceptual entity one in ICM one provides mental access to conceptual entity three in ICM two. Accordingly, metonymy one is changed to metonymy two. The contiguity between conceptual entity one and conceptual entity two is the same as the contiguity between the conceptual entity one and conceptual entity three. Due to the change of ICM, metonymy is changed and incongruity comes out. Therefore, it can be inferred that English jokes are generated by the change of metonymy from cognitive linguistics.

Key words: The generation of English jokes; Cognitive metonymy; Contiguity; ICM; Conceptual entity; Incongruity

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INTRODUCTION

English jokes are essential ingredients of everyday interaction and socialization. Scholars have been working on English jokes in many fields such as philosophy, psychology, anthropology, sociology, literature and linguistics. In linguistics, Studies of English jokes in terms of figures of speech, script theories, cooperative principles and relevance theory all contribute to linguistic understanding of English jokes, but no one sees a full picture of the generation of English jokes in terms of the linguistic mechanism (Xu, 2004). This above-mentioned deficiency leaves a research space. Humor and language are interdependent (Apte, 1985) and cognitive linguistics has developed considerably fast since the late 1980s. Thus a cognitive linguistic exploration into English jokes is made in this research. This study poses a viewpoint that the change of metonymy generates English jokes through the change of ICM (idealized Cognitive Model). Then a framework of the generation of English jokes is established and can be applied to explain the generation of English jokes.

1. MAIN LINGUISTIC STUDIES OF ENGLISH JOKES

In the West, within the linguistic field, English jokes have been studied from syntactic, pragmatic and semantic perspectives. In syntax, Oaks (1994) offered a catalogue of syntactic and lexical devices for the creation of ambiguity within jokes. Robert Hetzron (1991) gave an extended account on the structure of jokes. Neal Norrick

(1989) explored the intertextuality of jokes. They all only took the syntactic elements into account. In pragmatics, Rachel Giora (2001) stated that pleasure and liking were induced by stimuli that involved both innovativeness and familiarity. Marlene Dolisky (1992) focused on the aspects of the unsaid in jokes and assumed that the place where the unsaid communication took place was the point of the joke where its “funniness” resided. However, what is about the said communication? Can said communication cause the “funniness”? These two questions were not settled by Marlene Dolisky. Ephratt (1996) stressed on the notion of speech acts in his pragmatic account of humor. In semantics, Raskin was considered as a leading figure in the linguistic field through proposing a script-based semantic theory of humor (SSTH), mainly taking jokes as the research subject. The general theory of verbal humor (GTVH) by Attardo and Raskin in 1991 is a broadening of the SSTH theory. These two theories are deemed as theories representative of the linguistic researches of verbal humor in the West. The SSTH theory is a semantic theory of verbal humor, whereas the GTVH theory is meant to account for both linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of verbal humor.

In China, according to the author’s rough survey in CNKI and Wanfang Data, contemporary scholars did research on English jokes in branches of linguistics, such as phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, rhetoric and cognitive linguistics. Researchers mainly did research on English jokes from the pragmatic perspective. They employed the key theories and notions of pragmatics such as the Cooperative Principle, the Relevance Theory, Presupposition and Context to study English jokes. There were also a large number of scholars who discussed English jokes in the rhetorical aspect. Fewer researchers study the generation of English jokes from the cognitive linguistics.

Therefore, this research probes into metonymy from cognitive linguistics and proposes that the change of metonymy generates English jokes through the change of ICM.

2. THE CHANGE OF METONYMY GENERATING ENGLISH JOKES THROUGH THE CHANGE OF ICM

2.1 Metonymy in Cognitive View

Metonymy as a conceptual phenomenon first caught the attention of cognitive linguistics in 1980. In George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s influential book *Metaphors We Live By*, metonymy was defined as a cognitive tool of conceptualizing one thing by means of its relation to something else. Later, Lakoff (1987, p.78) viewed metonymy as a stand-for relation occurring idealized cognitive models (ICMs). Radden and Kovecses (1999,

p.21) made it clear that metonymy is a cognitive process in which one conceptual entity, the vehicle, provides mental access to another conceptual entity, the target, within the same idealized cognitive model (ICM), from which it can be inferred that metonymy is operated within one ICM.

There are three key elements in understanding metonymy from cognitive view, which are conceptual entity, ICM and contiguity. To better understand cognitive metonymy, ICM and contiguity are elaborated in the following. ICM is the structure that represents speaker’s conceptual knowledge and it is the same concept as “scene”, “frame”, “script”, “scenario” or “domain” used by other cognitive linguists. As for contiguity, Koch (1999, p.146) posed that contiguity is the relation between elements of a frame or between the frame as a whole and its elements and stated that contiguity is a conceptual relation. In this study, contiguity refers to the relation between two conceptual entities.

2.2 The Change of Metonymy Generating English Jokes through the Change of ICM

Four steps to explain the process of generating English jokes by the change of metonymy are elaborated, which include identifying conceptual entity and ICM in English jokes, identifying contiguity within ICM in metonymy, the change of ICM and incongruity and the generation of English jokes.

2.2.1 Identifying Conceptual Entity and ICM in English Jokes

Joke(1) and joke(2) are casually selected from *English Laughs* (Cai, 2002).

Joke(1) Barber: Did you have ketchup with your lunch, sir?

Customer: No, I didn’t.

Barber: In that case, I seem to have slipped with the razor.

In joke(1), conceptual entity one “being dyed in red” provides mental access to conceptual entity two “the slipping of the razor” within ICM “doing the hair cutting”. In the meantime, conceptual entity one “being dyed in red” provides mental access to conceptual entity three “having ketchup for lunch” within ICM “having lunch”.

Joke(2) Doctor: I can’t do anything about your condition. I’m afraid it’s hereditary.

Patient: In that case, send me the bill to my parents.

In joke(2), conceptual entity one “hereditary factor” provides mental access to conceptual entity two “the illness of this patient” within ICM “seeing the doctor”. Meanwhile, conceptual entity one “hereditary factor” provides mental access to conceptual entity three “the payment of the illness treatment” within ICM “paying the doctor”.

2.2.2 Identifying Contiguity Within ICM in Metonymy

Jokes(1) and joke(2) are still taken as examples to identify their contiguity within ICM in metonymy.

As for joke (1), conceptual entity one “being dyed in red” provides mental access to conceptual entity two “the slipping of the razor” within ICM “doing the haircutting”. There is a contiguous relation between being dyed in red and the slipping of the razor, which can be described as being dyed in red resulting from the slipping of the razor. Simultaneously, conceptual entity one “being dyed in red” provides mental access to conceptual entity three “having ketchup for lunch” within ICM “having lunch”. There is also a contiguous relation between being dyed in red and having ketchup for lunch, which can be described as being dyed in red resulting from having ketchup for lunch. It is abstracted from this analysis that the contiguity in joke(1) is EFFECT FOR CAUSE relation within ICM “doing the hair cutting” and ICM “having lunch”.

In joke(2), “the hereditary factor” provides mental access to “the illness of this patient” within ICM “seeing the doctor”. There is a contiguous relation between the hereditary factor and the illness of this patient, which is described as the hereditary factor leading to the illness of this patient. At the same time, “the hereditary factor” provides mental access to “the payment of the ill treatment” within ICM “paying the doctor”. There is also a contiguous relation between the hereditary factor and the payment of the ill treatment. Accordingly, the contiguity in joke(2) is CAUSE FOR EFFECT relation within ICM “seeing the doctor” and ICM “paying the doctor”.

2.2.3 The Change of ICM

As defined, metonymy is a cognitive process within one ICM. If ICM one in metonymy one is changed to ICM two, metonymy one will be changed to metonymy two.

Take joke (1) and joke(2) for example. In joke(1), since ICM one “doing the hair cutting” is changed to ICM two “having lunch”, metonymy one is transformed into metonymy two. Metonymy one is described as the cognitive process in which “being dyed in red” provides mental access to “the slipping of the razor” within ICM one “doing the hair cutting”, while metonymy two is described as the cognitive process in which “being dyed in red” provides mental access to “having ketchup for lunch” within ICM two “having lunch”. The contiguity in two metonymies is EFFECT FOR CAUSE.

As for joke(2), because ICM one “seeing the doctor” is changed to ICM two “paying the doctor”, metonymy one is transformed into metonymy two. Metonymy one is described as the cognitive process in which “hereditary factor” provides mental access to “the illness of this patient” within ICM one “seeing the doctor”. Metonymy two is described as the cognitive process in which “hereditary factor” provides mental access to “the payment of the illness treatment” within ICM two “paying

the doctor”. The contiguity in metonymy one and two is CAUSE FOR EFFECT.

Take another example. Joke(3) from *English Laughs* (Cai, 2002) is studied.

Joke(3) A: Waiter, do you have any wild duck?

B: No, sir. But I can irritate a tame one for you.

In joke(3), conceptual entity one “the wild duck” provides mental access to conceptual entity two “the edible duck” within ICM one “eating duck”. Meanwhile, conceptual entity one provides mental access to conceptual entity three “the untamed ducks” with ICM two “types of ducks”. In metonymy one, there is a contiguous relation between the wild duck and the edible duck. In the dining room, the wild duck is one member of the edible ducks. In metonymy two, there is a contiguous relation between the wild duck and the untamed ducks. The conceptual contiguity can be expressed as MEMBER FOR CATEGORY. Since ICM is changed from “eating duck” to “types of ducks”, metonymy one is changed to metonymy two.

2.2.4 Incongruity and Generation of English Jokes

Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary (fourth edition) defines “incongruous” as “strange because not in harmony with the surrounding features; out of place”. It can be concluded from analyzing English jokes that the change of ICM makes incongruity appear. As mentioned in joke(1), ICM is changed from “doing the hair cutting” to “having lunch”. According to common sense, the slipping of the barber's razor will make the customer bleed. However, being dyed in red provides mental access to conceptual entity three “having ketchup for lunch”. It is quite incongruous for the customer to have ketchup when the barber cuts his/her hair.

In joke(2), ICM is changed from “seeing the doctor” to “paying the doctor”. According to common understanding, the hereditary factor may lead to the patient's illness. However, the hereditary factor provides mental access to conceptual entity three “the payment of the illness treatment”. It is very strange for the patient to associate the hereditary factor with the fee of the illness treatment.

As to joke(3), ICM one “eating duck” is changed to ICM two “types of ducks”. In the dining room, the customer always orders the wild duck because it is edible and nutritious. However, the wild duck provides mental access to the untamed ducks. It is out of place for the customer to talk about raising and taming ducks in one dining room.

Since laughter is from incongruity and English jokes are for laughter, fun and joy, English jokes are produced.

2.3 Proposed Framework of English Jokes Generation

Based on the viewpoint that the change of ICM generates English jokes via the change of ICM, a framework of

the generation of English jokes is proposed (as shown in Figure 1).

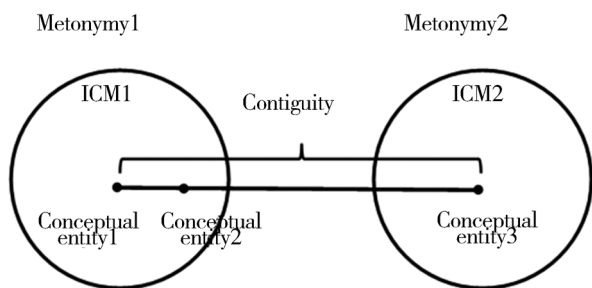


Figure 1
The Generation of English Jokes

Metonymy is operated within one ICM, which means that one ICM stands for one metonymy. If ICM is different, metonymy will be different. In metonymy one, conceptual entity one is supposed to provide mental access to conceptual entity two. However, conceptual entity one provides mental access to conceptual entity three. Conceptual entity three is in ICM two, so there is metonymy two. With the same contiguity, ICM is changed, metonymy will be changed accordingly. Due to the change of ICM, the incongruity comes out and English jokes are generated.

2.4 Application of the Framework of the Generation of English Jokes

Two randomly-selected jokes from *English Laughs* (Cai, 2002) are taken as examples in which the framework of the generation of English jokes is used to explain jokes’ generation.

Joke(4) Everybody was dancing while a young girl was sitting alone in a chair. Just then, she was happy to see a handsome young man coming towards her.

“Are you going to dance?” asked the man pleasantly.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Good,” he said. “May I have your seat then?”

As to joke(4), in metonymy one, conceptual entity one “asking for dancing” is supposed to provide mental access to conceptual entity two “dancing with the girl” within ICM one “wanting to dance with someone at party”. However, in metonymy two, conceptual entity one provides mental access to conceptual entity three “taking the girl’s seat ” within ICM two “wanting to take a seat”. In metonymy one, there is a contiguous relation between asking for dancing and dancing with the girl. The young girl is invited to dance with the handsome man by means of the man’s requirement. Meanwhile, in metonymy two, there is a contiguous relation between asking for dancing and taking the girl’s seat. The contiguity in metonymy one and two can be expressed as REQUIREMENT FOR ACTION. ICM is changed, so the metonymy is changed. It is quite out of place for a gentleman to ask for taking the girl’s seat at party by inviting her to dance. Hence the joke is produced.

Joke(5) The judge sentenced the money launderer to a twenty-year term. Afterward, she rushed into her chambers, threw off her robe, and headed for the exit.

“What’s the matter, Judge?” her assistant asked. “Are you afraid his gang will get you?”

“Don’t be silly,” the judge said. “I’m going over to rent his apartment.”

In joke(5), in metonymy one, conceptual entity one “leaving in a hurry” provides mental access to conceptual entity two “escaping from the revenge” within ICM “revenge”. Simultaneously, in metonymy two, conceptual entity one provides mental access to conceptual entity three “renting the launderer’s apartment” within ICM “renting houses”. In metonymy one, there is a contiguous relation between leaving in a hurry and escaping from the revenge. In order to escape from the revenge, the judge leaves in a hurry. Besides, in metonymy two, there is a contiguous relation between leaving in a hurry and renting the launderer’s apartment. The contiguity can be expressed as ACTION FOR ORDER.

ICM is changed from “revenge” to “renting houses”. We generally think that because the judge is afraid of the revenge of the money launderer, she leaves the chamber quickly. If we misunderstand the purpose of the judge’s quick-leaving, the incongruity will be produced. This joke arises directly from the incongruity, which is caused by the change of ICM. Therefore, joke(5) is generated.

3. MAJOR FINDINGS, LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The study conducts a cognitive linguistic qualitative exploration into the generating of English jokes and consequently makes some contributions to the linguistic study of English jokes. Three major findings will be pinpointed as follows.

First, it is not metonymy from the traditional view but metonymy from the cognitive view that plays a major role in generating English jokes. The theoretical basis in this study is Radden and Kovecses’s understanding of metonymy as a cognitive process. Second, this study poses the viewpoint that the change of metonymy generates English jokes through the change of ICM. Thirdly, the framework of the generation of English jokes is set up and can be applied to explain English jokes generation clearly.

The viewpoint and proposed framework are not to be deemed perfect. Metonymy from the cognitive view is not the only one to account for the generation of English jokes. In a sense, it lacks paralinguistic analysis. Because of the social and context-sensitive nature of English jokes, a multidimensional account for English jokes should include paralinguistic considerations. However, from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the viewpoint

and the proposed framework of the generation of English jokes can be conducive to the research of the generation of English jokes and offer some directions for researchers who are interested in it to do future research.

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