

Homophones in Mandarin Chinese

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Received: November 17, 2024 Accepted: December 11, 2024 Published: December 23, 2024

doi:10.5296/ijl.v16i6.22504

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v16i6.22504>

Abstract

With the increasing prevalence of homophonic phenomena in language life, research on homophones has also received increasing attention from academia. Homophones as a rhetorical method, can assist in the implementation of many rhetorical devices, among which imitation, pun and deliberate misinterpretation are the most frequent in language life. The three have the characteristics of being similar in sounds, different in forms and meanings between the prototype and the variant in the structure of rhetorical devices, so confusion often occurs when distinguishing them.

Keywords: Homophones, Chinese, Rhetoric

1. Introduction

The homophone is one of the most significant rhetorical methods in Chinese and has a very long history in expression. As one of the most valuable works in the history of Chinese rhetoric research, Chen (1932) mentions a famous line in the poem of Liu Yuxi which was written in Tang Dynasty: *Dong⁵⁵bian⁵⁵ ri⁵¹ chu⁵⁵ xi⁵⁵bian⁵⁵ yu²¹⁴, dao⁵¹shi⁵¹ wu³⁵qing³⁵ que⁵¹ you²¹⁴qing³⁵*. In English this famous line means “In the east the sun is out, in the west it is raining; it is not yet clear, but somewhat clear, you may as well say”. Professor Xu Yuanchong translated it in literary way: “The west is veiled in rain; the east enjoys sunshine. My gallant is as deep in love as the day is fine”. From the surface form, this famous line is talking about the weather. Why did Professor Xu Yuanchong mention love? The reason is that in Chinese the syllable “qing³⁵” means both “sunny day (in weather)” and “love (between young couples)”. Chen (1932) classifies this homophonic phenomenon as the rhetorical device of pun.

Meanwhile, in modern Chinese daily life, homophones are more and more popular. For example, McDonald’s restaurant has launched a promotional slogan: “shi³⁵ yuan³⁵ chi⁵⁵ bao²¹⁴”. The syllable “bao²¹⁴” in Chinese both means “be full” and “a hamburger”, so

“*shi*³⁵ *yuan*³⁵ *chi*⁵⁵ *bao*²¹⁴” can be explained by both “ten yuan is enough to eat” and “ten yuan is enough to buy a hamburger”.

According to homophonic phenomena becoming increasingly common, some researches claim that homophone should be considered as a type of rhetorical devices itself but not only the way constructing other rhetorical devices. In fact, at the end of the last century, some researchers have already included homophones in the system of rhetorical devices, such as Zhou and Pu (1985), Liu (1993), Li (1999), etc. Recently, Zhang and Wang (2022) suggest granting homophones the status of a rhetorical device, which would facilitate the systematization and scientification of homophone research. From this perspective, imitations, puns and deliberate misinterpretations realized by homophonic method can all be classified under the category of homophones. Whether homophones should be established as an independent rhetorical device is not the focus of this paper, but the conclusions of these researches can reflect the importance of homophones in Chinese expression.

The survey has been conducted among 170 college students on distinguishing homophonic imitations, puns and deliberate misinterpretations. The results indicate that 82.4% of respondents are unable to accurately distinguish between these three categories. Therefore, it is very imperative to do an effective analysis of the three from the perspective of homophones.

2. Rhetorical Devices Caused by Homophones

Imitation, pun and deliberate misinterpretation are three rhetorical devices in Chinese. Their commonality is that they can be formed due to the same or similar pronunciation. That is the reason why the paper focuses on the three and discusses comparison among them.

2.1 Imitation Caused by Homophones

Imitation is one of common rhetorical devices in Chinese. Xu (2003) classifies imitations into four categories based on the different constituent units. The first type is imitative words, which are composed of words as units of imitation. The second type is imitative phrases, which are composed of phrases as units of imitation. The third type is imitative sentences, which are constructed in units of sentences. The fourth type is imitative article, which are composed of paragraphs and chapters as units. Meanwhile, Xu (2003) also classifies imitation into five types from the perspective of its methods: homophonic imitation, semantic imitation, formal imitation, intonation imitation, and stylistic imitation. Among them, homophonic imitation is the type of imitation involved in this paper, which is “imitation based on the pronunciation”.

“出口成章 *chu*⁵⁵ *kou*²¹⁴ - *cheng*³⁵ *zhang*⁵⁵” is a Chinese idiom which means “words flow from the mouth as from the pen of a master”. As the example (1) shows, “脏 *zang*⁵⁵” replaces “章 *zhang*⁵⁵” on the basis of homophonic pronunciation. In Chinese, the syllable “*zang*⁵⁵” is the same as the syllable “*zhang*⁵⁵” except for the initial consonant. This is a typical example of homophonic imitation.

- (1) 乖巧 女孩 为何 “出口成脏”? (北晚在线 , 2019-04-01)

Guai⁵⁵qiao²¹⁴ nǚ²¹⁴hai³⁵ wei⁵¹he³⁵ “chu⁵⁵kou²¹⁴-cheng³⁵zang⁵⁵”?

(From www.takefoto.cn, 2019-04-01)

well-behaved girl why “dirty words flow from the mouth”?

Why does a well-behaved girl speak dirty words?

“草木皆兵 *cao²¹⁴mu⁵¹-jie⁵⁵bing⁵⁵*” is another Chinese idiom which means “every tree and bush are treated as soldiers” used to describe a state of extreme nervousness. As the following example (2) shows, “冰 *bing⁵⁵*” replaces “兵 *bing⁵⁵*” on the basis of the same pronunciation.

- (2) 广西 一夜入冬 , 不少 地方 “草木皆冰”。

(广西新闻网 , 2022-12-06)

Guang²¹⁴xi⁵⁵ yi⁵⁵ye⁵¹ru⁵¹dong⁵⁵, bu⁵¹shao²¹⁴ di⁵¹fang “cao²¹⁴mu⁵¹-jie⁵⁵bing⁵⁵”.

(From www.gxnews.com.cn, 2022-12-06)

Guangxi one night into winter many place grass and trees are frozen

Guangxi enters winter overnight, and many places have been frozen.

The above two examples reveal that the key to the formation of homophonic imitation lies in the replacement of the same or similar pronunciation. The two components that can form a substitution relationship, apart from having the same or similar pronunciation, have different characters and meanings. Meanwhile, the meanings of the prototype and the variant have no relationship from each other (such as “章 *zhang⁵⁵*” and “脏 *zang⁵⁵*”, “兵 *bing⁵⁵*” and “冰 *bing⁵⁵*”). Additionally, obtained through homophonic imitation, it is a new temporary language form that is not included in the vocabulary system, which is another key factor in determining homophonic imitation.

2.2 Pun Caused by Homophones

Pun is another common rhetorical device in Chinese. Wu (2020) divided puns into three categories. The first type is the “homophonic pun” formed by the same or similar conditions of speech. The second type is the “semantic pun” formed by utilizing the polysemy of words and the ambiguity of semantics in specific contexts. The third type is the “object pun” formed

by utilizing the ambiguity of the narrative object in a specific context. The first type is directly related to the discussion in this paper. The famous line “*Dong⁵⁵bian⁵⁵ ri⁵¹ chu⁵⁵ xi⁵⁵ bian⁵⁵ yu²¹⁴, dao⁵¹ shi⁵¹ wu³⁵ qing³⁵ que⁵¹ you²¹⁴ qing³⁵*” written by Liu Yuxi in Tang Dynasty mentioned above is one of the typical cases of homophonic pun.

In recent days, homophonic pun is also a common rhetorical method in language usage. For example, “年年有余 *nian³⁵ nian³⁵ -you²¹⁴ yu³⁵*” is a Chinese idiom which means “have a surplus year after year”. In the following example (3), because of the same pronunciation, “鱼 *yu³⁵*” replaces “余 *yu³⁵*”. In the surface meaning, it means that every year fishermen lived by Chagan Lake will have fish to catch; while in the deep meaning, it also means that every year people will have more than what they need.

(3) 守护 好 查干湖， 生活 “年年有鱼”。

(《人民日报》，2022-08-23)

shou²¹⁴ hu⁵¹ hao²¹⁴ cha³⁵ gan⁵⁵ hu³⁵ sheng⁵⁵ huo³⁵ nian³⁵ nian³⁵ -you²¹⁴ yu³⁵

(RENMIN RIBAO, 2022-08-23)

protect well Chagan Lake life year-year-have-fish

Protect Chagan Lake well, and every year there is lots of fish to catch. (surface meaning)

Protect Chagan Lake well, and every year there is leftover. (deep meaning)

Besides homophonic pun, semantic pun is also very popular in Chinese expression. As the following example (4) shows, “从头开始 *cong³⁵ tou³⁵ kai⁵⁵ shi²¹⁴*” can be taken as a semantic pun, because of the double understanding of “头 *tou³⁵*” which means both “head” and “the beginning”. The example tells the story that in China the second day of the second lunar month is a traditional festival called “Dragon Head Raising Day”, on which day people often prefer to cut their hair that means dragon raises its head and good lucky is coming at the beginning of the year. That is the reason why “从头开始 *cong³⁵ tou³⁵ kai⁵⁵ shi²¹⁴*” means both “from one’s head” and “from the very beginning”. It’s also a typical semantic pun in Chinese due to the double understanding of “头 *tou³⁵*”.

- (4) 二月二 龙抬头， 春暖花开， 从头开始
- (微博, 2020-02-25)

er⁵¹yue⁵¹er⁵¹ long³⁵tai³⁵tou³⁵ chun⁵⁵nuan²¹⁴hua⁵⁵kai⁵⁵, cong³⁵tou³⁵kai⁵⁵shi²¹⁴

(From Microblog, 2020-02-25)

second-month-second dragon-raise-head spring-warm-flower-bloom from-head-start

On Dragon Head Festival, spring has come and the flowers are in bloom. Everything starts anew.

Compared with the example (3) and (4), it can be found that the significant difference between homophonic pun and semantic pun is about the characters. In the former, the characters are different such as “鱼 *yu*³⁵” and “余 *yu*³⁵”, although they have the same or similar pronunciation. However, in the latter, the characters are the same such as “头 *tou*³⁵” which exactly utilizes the polysemy of words. Except for the different characters, another important feature of homophonic pun is that not only the surface unit but also the deep unit are both the existing forms in language, which can differ from homophonic imitation. Additionally, as for the meanings, although the meaning of the surface unit is different from that of the deep one, which is the same with homophonic imitation, the two have the relationship in meanings. For example, in (3) the meaning of “鱼 *yu*³⁵” and “余 *yu*³⁵” are different but they have the relationship in the certain context. “Having lots of fish (鱼 *yu*³⁵)” means “sufficient remain (余 *yu*³⁵)”.

2.3 Deliberate Misinterpretation Caused by Homophones

Deliberate misinterpretation is a rhetorical device in Chinese, which is not used as common as the above two rhetorical devices imitation and pun. However, it also can be caused by homophones so it is discussed here to compare with imitation and pun.

There is an example of deliberate misinterpretation shown as the following example (5). It is taken from a crosstalk named “My Transformation” performed by two famous crosstalk performers Mr. Yue Yunpeng and Mr. Sun Yue in the CCTV Chinese Spring Festival Gala of the year 2023. The crosstalk was performed after a song sung by a famous female singer named “*Tan*³⁵ *Wei*³⁵*wei*³⁵”. That is the reason why the crosstalk performer Mr. Yue said in the crosstalk that he looked at Ms. Tan bravely. In Chinese, “*dan*²¹⁴ *da*⁵¹-*wang*⁵¹ *wei*³⁵” is an idiom used to describe a person who is undaunted and reckless. As the example (5) shows, in the crosstalk the performer deliberately misinterpreted the idiom and gave it a new meaning based on the same pronunciation of “望维 *wang*⁵¹ *wei*³⁵” (means “looking at the singer named Wei”) and “妄为 *wang*⁵¹ *wei*³⁵” (means “acting recklessly”).

(5) 我 胆大“望维”。

wo²¹⁴ dan²¹⁴ da⁵¹ - “wang⁵¹ wei³⁵”

I courage-big-look-a famous singer’s name

I bravely looked at Ms. Tan Weiwei.

From the above example (5), it can be found that deliberate misinterpretation caused by homophones has the same pronunciation but different characters and meanings such as “望维 wang⁵¹wei³⁵” and “妄为 wang⁵¹wei³⁵” which not only have different meanings with each other but also the meanings of the two have no relationship. That is the main feature of deliberate misinterpretation caused by homophones.

2.4 Comparison Among the Three Rhetorical Devices

Based on the above analysis, the comparison results shown in the table below can be obtained. From the table, the three rhetorical devices have the same features and also have the different ones. Their surface expression has the same or similar pronunciation and different characters with their prototype. Imitation has created a completely new form that is not present in the language through homophones. Pun and deliberate misinterpretation have not created new forms. Their variants and prototypes are both existing forms in language. The meaning of variants and prototypes is irrelevant in imitation and deliberate misinterpretation; while that of pun can be related in certain context.

Table 1. The features of imitation, pun and deliberate misinterpretation

Rhetorical Devices and Features	Imitation	Pun	Deliberate Misinterpretation
Existing form in language	-	+	+
Having the same or similar pronunciation	+	+	+
Different in characters	+	+	+
Having unrelated meanings	+	-	+

3. Pun Based on Imitation

Xu and Li (2024) claims that the usage of homophonic expressions is intentional. It reflects in language use the subjective physicalism, according to which mental properties supervene on physical properties (namely, mind-object supervenience). Regarding this mind-object supervenience, “mind” means the “state of mind” of the expressive subject when one

produces linguistic expressions. And the reason why one's mind has such supervenience is related to both his/her own characteristics and the physical objects in the same situation as he/she is in at that given time. The mind-object supervenience involved in language use is embodied by the relevance of situation and state of mind, that is, object-emotion-expression association. As far as homophonic expressions are concerned, the object-emotion-expression association is realized by means of implicit expressions and explicit expressions. The reason about increasing phenomenon of homophones used today is precisely because people are paying more and more attention to the implicit and explicit meanings when they use language to express themselves. Therefore, while using homophones to create new forms (i.e., using homophonic imitation), people also pay attention to the meaning of the original form (prototype), and use the explicit expression of imitation to balance the implicit connotation of the prototype.

As the following example (6) shows, the prototype is “马上 *ma²¹⁴shang⁵¹*”, which does not appear in an explicit form, but instead a creative new temporary form called “on the QR code” by using the homophonic sound of “码上 *ma²¹⁴shang⁵¹*”. From this perspective, the example first utilizes homophonic imitation, where “码上” is a new form derived from “马上” through homophonic distortion. Secondly, in terms of semantic understanding, the meaning of the prototype “马上”(which means “immediately” in English) is hidden in the explicit expression of the imitation “码上”, achieving a balance of meaning “problems can be solved immediately by scanning the code”, which is another layer of pun. Nowadays, the homophonic expressions commonly used in language life are mostly the simultaneous use of homophonic imitations and puns, or homophonic puns based on homophonic imitations.

- (6) 有 意见 , “码上” 说。
 you²¹⁴ yi⁵¹·jian⁵¹ ma²¹⁴shang⁵¹ shuo⁵⁵
 have opinion on the QR code say

If you have any opinions, please scan the QR code and tell us.

4. Conclusion

Imitation, pun and deliberate misinterpretation are three traditional rhetorical devices in Chinese. In recent years, homophonic phenomena have become increasingly common in language life. People can find these usages easily in titles, slogans, store names, newspapers, online platforms and even language landscapes. Therefore, the rhetorical status of homophones is increasingly receiving attention and concern from the academic research. From the perspective of homophones, these three rhetorical devices have commonalities, which makes them easily confused so the distinction among them is very important and necessary. The three have the characteristics of being same or similar in sounds, different in forms, and different in meanings between the prototype and the variant in the structure of

rhetorical devices, so confusion often occurs when distinguishing them. By observing the data from the corpus, it can be found that the difference between the three rhetorical devices lies in the fact that the variant of homophonic imitation is a temporary expression form based on the deformation of the prototype, and the meaning is completely unrelated to it. The prototypes and variants of puns and deliberate misinterpretations with homophones are both existing forms in language, and although their meanings are different. The meanings of puns can be associated in specific contexts. Given that people often balance the expression of meaning when using homophones, puns based on homophonic imitation are often the most common in language life. For example, the name of a clothing store is “衣衣不舍 Yi⁵⁵ Yi⁵⁵ Bu⁵¹ She²¹⁴”, which is based on the idiom “依依不舍 Yi⁵⁵ Yi⁵⁵ Bu⁵¹ She²¹⁴” (means “reluctant to leave” in English). Through the homophonic sound of “衣 yi⁵⁵” (means “clothes” in English) and “依 yi⁵⁵”, it imitates the store’s function of selling clothes and uses the meaning of “reluctant to leave” to emphasize the quality of the clothing in the store, making customers feel the desire to shop in the store.

Since people focus on the meaning while constructing homophones, the negative connotations in the original meaning should be avoided; otherwise, it will be confusing or even misleading. For example, the homophone between “无饿不坐 wu³⁵-e⁵¹-bu⁵¹-zuo⁵¹” (means “no hunger, no sitting” in English) and the idiom “无恶不作 wu³⁵-e⁵¹-bu⁵¹-zuo⁵¹” (means “commit all sorts of crimes” in English) is formed by replacing the homophones of “饿 e⁵¹” (means “hunger” in English) with “恶 e⁵¹” (means “evil” in English) and “坐 zuo⁵¹” (means “sitting” in English) with “作 zuo⁵¹” (means “action” in English). Although the intention is to tell passersby to eat when they are hungry, its original meaning of “commit all sorts of crimes” has a negative meaning of “describing a person as extremely bad”.

In the expression of Chinese, the relationship between implicit and explicit expressions is like a shadow, which determines that such homophonic rhetoric will become more and more prevalent in language life, enriching our language expression. Therefore, it is also very important to accurately distinguish and apply imitations, puns, and deliberate misinterpretations under the influence of homophones.

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