

Homonym in Chinese Advertising Slogan from A Semantic Perspective

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Abstract

The opposition and unity of sound, meaning, and form constitute the three elements of language, that is, each language symbol contains three aspects: sound, meaning, and form. Due to the arbitrariness of language and certain contradiction caused by "less sound, fewer forms, and more meaning", the relationship between these elements in the language system is not one-to-one, leading to the phenomenon of polysemy and homonym in languages. Ambiguity is a common linguistic phenomenon that exists in both ancient and modern languages, both locally and across languages. It is a special relationship between language structure and meaning. Linguists believe that the phenomenon of ambiguity in the meaning of a word or sentence, or the existence of two or more interpretations for one expression, is called linguistic ambiguity. In this theoretical context, homonym is a type of lexical ambiguity widely used in modern advertising. The present study attempts to analyze the linguistic significance of homophones in advertisements through specific examples, so that people can better understand the wit, humor, and richness of languages, while paying attention to its impact on language development and adolescents. Through these measures, it can be expected that more benefits and less harm will be achieved in the long run.

Keywords: Advertising, Semantics, Homonym, Influence

1. Introduction

Advertising is a promotional tool that openly and widely conveys information to the public through certain means of media for a specific purpose. It can be broadly or narrowly defined in terms of its meaning. Broad advertising refers to advertisements that are not intended for profit, such as government announcements, statements from political parties, religious groups, institutions, social organizations, and etc.; Narrowly defined advertising refers to profit-making advertising, also known as commercial advertising, which aims at profit. It is usually an important means of communication among producers, distributors, and consumers, or act as an important channel for enterprises to occupy target market, promote sales, and deliver services. Industrial and commercial enterprises often pay for such media to disseminate product or service information, in order that promotion can be achieved.

As the essence of advertising messages, language often plays the greatest persuasive role in inducing consumers to purchase products or services. Since ordinary consumers rarely spend a lot of time studying advertisements carefully, advertising language must attract readers in a short time and persuade them quickly. Therefore, the form, language and content of the advertisement must be eye-catching and impressive. As a common ambiguity phenomenon, homophones often produces unexpected effects when applied to advertising language. The present paper attempts to analyze the role of homophones in advertising, from a semantic perspective through specific advertising examples.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Semantics

The meaning of word is of great importance in language research. Many linguists have published relevant monographs on the meaning of word, including Cruse (1986), Dowty (1979), Jackendoff (1972, 1983), Katz (1972, 1987), Kempson (1975, 1977), Leech (1971, 1981), Lyons (1963, 1977, 1981), Martin (1987), Nida (1975), Palmer (1981), Saeed (2016), Salomon (1996), Ullmann (1951, 1957, 1962), Croft (2004), Evans (2006), Geeraerts (1997, 2006), Lakoff (1987, 2003), Langacker (1987, 1990, 1991, 1999), Talmy (2000a, 2000b),

Ungerer (2006), Taylor (1995). As the basic unit of semantic research, the study of word meaning can be regarded as the pearl on the crown of linguistic research.

Semantics is a discipline that studies the relationship between language meaning and language expression. Semantics studies the semantic features of natural language; It studies semantics as a component of language, exploring its properties, internal structure, changes and developments, as well as the relationships between meanings. The term 'semantics' was first proposed by French linguist Michel Breal in 1893. In 1897, Breal's book "Exploration of Semantics" was published, marking the gradual formation of semantics as understood today. In 1900, this book was translated into English and titled *Semantics: Studies in the Science of Meanings*. This book is the first work on language semantics, with a focus on the historical development of word meanings, balancing lexical and grammatical meanings. Subsequently, the development of semantics underwent a tortuous process. Semantics began to become an independent discipline in the late 19th and early 20th century, gradually gaining momentum in the 1950s, and only then did it fully develop in the 1970s. As more and more linguists begin to pay attention to and look into the study of semantics, publishing monographs, semantics has gradually become a mature system. In modern linguistics, semantics, syntax and phonetics have become the three major branches. Moreover, some theoretical schools have also established under semantic study, such as structural semantics, interpretive semantics, generative semantics, functional semantics, and etc.

As a branch of linguistics, semantics can generally be divided into two major branches: vocabulary semantics and syntactic semantics. Vocabulary semantics mainly studies the semantic issues of vocabulary units, the semantic structure and aggregation relationships of words, as well as the development and evolution of semantics. Syntactic semantics mainly studies the semantic construction and combination relationships of sentences, as well as the semantic connections between sentences. In recent years, modern semantics has shown several significant characteristics as multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary, multi-dimensional, and multi-level. If traditional semantic research is mainly limited to the level of lexical meaning, one of the biggest characteristics of modern semantics is the multi-level examination of language meaning.

2.2 Homonym

The unity of opposites among sound, meaning, and form constitutes the three elements of language, that is, each language symbol has three aspects of sound, meaning, and form. Due to the arbitrariness of language and the relative contradiction of "fewer sounds, fewer forms, and more meanings" in language, the relationship between the three elements of sound, meaning, and form in the language system is not one-to-one correspondence, resulting in polysemy and homophonic or homomorphic phenomena in language. Sometimes the same sound forms express different meanings, such as bear(noun) and bear(verb); Sometimes the sound is the same but the form and meaning are completely different, such as hair and hare; Some are similar in form but have different meanings, such as lead (v. guide) - lead (n. lead). The complex relationship between sound, meaning, and form mentioned above constitutes the phenomenon of homophones in language. The words that express this phenomenon are called homophones, and the phenomenon of homophones is common in both English and Chinese languages.

In vocabulary, Homophones, homographs, and homophonic words are collectively referred to as generalized homonyms, while narrow homonyms refer specifically to homophones. In both English and Chinese languages, the phenomenon of homophones with different shapes and meanings is extremely common and has a large number, occupying a core position in the entire homophone system. They are stable, flexible, and are often widely and frequently used, making them one of the focal issues and difficulties in language practice; If used properly, the effect is remarkable, while on the contrary, it may be ambiguous and obscure.

Homonyms are an important aspect of semantic research, consisting of two morphemes: homos (identical) and onoma (name) in Greek. Their literal meaning is "two or more words with the same name"; Its academic definition is "words with the same pronunciation but different meanings". Homonyms can be divided into two categories: perfect homonyms and partial homonyms. A "perfect homonymic word" refers to words with the same pronunciation and spelling, such as a pun; while a "partially homonymic word" refers to words with the same pronunciation but different spelling and meaning, such as homophonic words. The process of understanding information is the key to understanding homonym and its meanings. Halliday defines the process of readers' understanding of the information structure of a text as the interaction between the known content of the receiver and the unknown content of the receiver, based on the receiver's understanding of the information in the article. In other words, it refers to the interaction between old and new information in the receiver's mind. The so-called old information can be the content mentioned earlier, or the information shared by readers and authors in the context. New information refers to information that is not mentioned in the previous text or

unexpected to readers. The old information is non labeled, so it is highly automated in the processing; New information is marked and significant, so it requires readers to spend time to manage and process. It is precisely through some known information that the entire semantic unit is activated and lays the foundation for information processing, thereby achieving the eye-catching purpose of new information. The phenomenon of homonym refers to the use of words with the same pronunciation to evoke relevant old information in people's minds, forming a strong contrast with the newly received relevant new information, thereby achieving the purpose of attracting readers' attention.

According to the linguist Jespersen (1933), in English language mono-syllabic homonymic words are about four times more than polysyllabic ones. The vast majority of homonymic words are classified by linguists as basic vocabulary in English (Basic Word Stock). They have a wide range of applications, high frequency of use, stable and flexible characteristics, making them very common and complex, and even becoming a difficulty in learning and using the language. But if used properly, unexpected language effects such as humor, subtlety, and liveliness can often be achieved. Conversely, it can lead to ambiguity and confusion.

3. Some Examples of Homonym in Chinese Advertising Slogan and Influence Analysis

3.1 Homonym in Slogan and Its Positive Influences

In advertising language, homonymic words are processed on the basis of well-known language units to form certain variations. This makes the audience realize that what is mentioned in the advertisement is not their usual way of expression, but has undergone certain changes. This change will immediately attract the attention of the audience and enable them to reprocess the information in conjunction with the context, thereby attracting readers in a short period of time and arousing people's purchasing desire. Proper use of homonym in advertisements can enhance their selling power and memory value. Here are some examples to illustrate:

1) OIC: This is an advertisement of glasses. It sounds similar to "oh, I see" in pronunciation, which is related to the theme of the advertisement in meaning, while OIC looks like a pair of glasses in appearance. The combination of multiple associations expresses the happy mood of nearsighted consumers after wearing these glasses, and the voice effect here is an important compensation method for visual impression.

2) "Seven days without 7-up make one weak". This is the advertising slogan for the beverage "7-up", which is referred to as "Qixi" in the Chinese market. "7 days" corresponds to "7-up", and "7 days" is exactly one week. The relationship between "week" and "weak" in the sentence is homonymic. And 'one' can be interpreted as an indefinite pronoun, representing 'anyone', as well as a numeral, representing 'a week'. The advertising slogan conveys the message to consumers: if you don't drink "7-up" for a day, your body will become weak; A "7-up" every day is the only way to be full of vitality. The reading is full of wit and aftertaste, reflecting the rhetorical effect of homonym in advertising language. As a skill, homonym brings people diversity and flexibility in perception and cognition of language. In addition, it also creates harmony and sweetness in audio-visual perception, enabling readers to sense the joy of language.

3) "We'll always make Time for you. Make time for time." This is the slogan for 'Time' magazine. Time refers to both "time" and "Time Weekly", with the meaning of "trend of the times". The repeated use of a set of perfect homonymic words, "Time" deepens the memory of journal names in readers and also clarifies to consumers the characteristics of "Time": keeping up with the trend of the times.

4) "Make your every HELLO a real good- buy." When people make a phone call, the first line they use is "Hello" to greet the counterpart, and the last line is "Good bye". If the sound quality is well from beginning to end, it indicates that this machine is indeed worth buying. Partial homonymic words as "Good buy" and "Good bye" are employed here, being pun and witty. As a result, advertising language maintains a self-dissemination effect, greatly enhancing the promotion of advertising.

5) "A deal with Diel means a good deal." This is an example of a combination of "homophones" and "polysemy". The word 'deal' is homophonic but not synonymous with 'Diesel'. 'a good deal' can be understood as both 'a good deal' and 'a lot'. This slogan can be understood as 'dealing with Diesel Company for genuine value' or 'dealing with our company means laughing all the way to the bank'.

3.2 Negative Influences of Homonym in Advertising Slogan

Advertising not only creates symbols and stimulates consumption, but also has a huge impact on the standardized development of language. Some advertising slogans excessively focus on the homonymic words and the meanings of key words, neglecting the regularity and rationality of the semantic sense of the language. This brings harms to the overall language development and damages the atmosphere created within the advertising industry, making the promotion information in advertisements irrelevant. And undoubtedly it is a

negative social impact.

1) Cause a change in the accuracy of word meaning. If only emphasizing the harmony of sounds without paying attention to the reasonable smoothness of semantics, for example, a Chinese medicine for treating liver diseases is advertised as "standing up for the liver to see its shadow" "立肝见影" (in Chinese, 立竿见影 is the original word with the meaning 'immediate effect'). The changes in some fixed phrases have led to ambiguity in the meaning of words, take for example, a few years ago, advertising slogans for a Chinese liquor brand "Fenjiu 汾酒" included "drinking must be Fen 喝酒必汾, Fenjiu must be drunk 汾酒必喝"; others such as "coughing must not be delayed 咳不容缓," and "endless joy in riding 骑乐无穷" all have a negative influence on the proper understanding of the original word meaning.

2) Affect the standardized use and promotion of language and writing. The use of homonym has made teenagers who tend to pursue fashion and flaunt their individuality a victim of non-standard language due to their insufficient knowledge reserves, language basics and discriminant ability. In light of this condition, government ministrations are obliged to improve regulatory mechanisms; Language researchers guide the public to establish correct language awareness; and the public audiences aim to improve literal appreciation and moral standards. Strengthening language teaching for teenagers is also an indispensable part of the entire programme. Through active guidance and proper employment of homonymic words in advertising slogans, the damage will diminish to its minimum.

3) Damage the healthy development of mainstream values. Some advertisements which contain homonymic words convey moral concepts that do not conform to mainstream values; Either its content stimulates people's (especially minors) sexual awareness, or reflects tendencies such as gender discrimination that are detrimental to the construction of spiritual civilization. A restaurant in Guizhou advertised "Renrou Baozi 仁肉包子", but it was actually just a baozi made of shrimp and pork. 'I want to clear my mouth' (lozenges) is not 'kissing', either. The restaurant actually "keeps up with the food (time) 与时 (食) 俱进", using the Party Central Committee's overall policy as a humor. Even more so, advertisements for breast augmentation for women have the following implicit homophones: "breast augmentation brings good luck 丰胸化吉", "care from childhood to adulthood", and "don't let men grasp it all at once". The advertising slogan of a certain paint factory is "lustful coating 好色之涂", and there is also a slogan for male products as "men's crotch is self-improvement"... Examples as such are far too more to count. These inappropriate uses will not only directly affect the development direction of mainstream values, but also go against the health communication of social culture.

4. Conclusion

By analyzing the semantic mechanism and effectiveness of homophones in advertising language, we find that homophones are indispensable tools for advertising creativity. If used properly, homophones will increase decoding difficulty, prolong decoding time, and enhance decoding interest, achieving what we call "attracting attention, arousing interest, stimulating desire, and generating action (i.e. AIDA)". However, if overused or inappropriately used, it can seriously pollute the language environment and bring negative effects to teenagers. Therefore, we must distinguish the pros and cons, starting from the perspective of seeking benefits and avoiding disadvantages, fully leverage the positive role of homophonic use in advertising creation, and avoid the adverse influence led by generalized use.

In practice, first of all, the characteristics of the advertised product (or service) are inevitably the focus: adhering to clarifying the meaning, accurately and reliably conveying the true information, and using homophones in a standardized and appropriate manner to avoid misunderstanding of the advertising message. Secondly, written expression should conform to the direction of social and cultural development, conveying a healthy and positive outlook on social life; when using text, it should be appropriate, natural, thought-provoking, and bring aesthetic enjoyment to people. Third, focus on the win-win combination of social and economic benefits. In some contemporary advertising, many commercial operators strive to cater to the vulgar and peculiar curiosities of certain audiences in order to promote sales and increase profits. Through the use of homophones, some idioms and fixed phrases are arbitrarily modified, thereby worsening the normative nature of the language and bringing negative impacts to social culture. Advertising copy is therefore obliged not to modify or partially replace words or phrases that we usually use in daily life, and in particular not to cater to trends or values that are not recommended by the public.

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