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Toward a Cognitive-Pragmatic Account of Humorous Metaphor in Chinese Diplomatic Discourse

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Abstract: Despite the repeated call for humor research, few attempts have been made to address humorous metaphors in diplomatic discourse. This paper examined each type of strategic humor behind these metaphors in Chinese diplomatic discourse from the perspective of cognitive pragmatics. Blending theory, metaphorical mapping, and inferential structure between source and target domain were examined to construe the implicature behind humorous metaphors in digital diplomacy, press conferences, and presidential speeches. We found: (1) multimodal resources can add more value to metaphor inference in digital diplomacy, especially with blending theory; (2) many offensive metaphors of PATIENT, PERFORMANCE have been attributed to the US and its allies.

Keywords: Humor; Metaphor, Cognitive-Pragmatic; Diplomacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Though "humor" originated from the West and is often considered not common in diplomacy, Chinese diplomats often use humor nowadays, shifting the Chinese Culture of being a bit serious. The Chinese diplomats create a playful frame to indirectly denote or mock the "enemy" or "exploiter".

This change in the diplomatic arena shows the leaders of China are adapting themselves to the Western culture of humor. Thus, the national identity has also been reconstructed as an international friend sharing the same diplomatic viewpoint that humor reflects wisdom and eases tension.

The role of humor in global diplomacy has now attracted global researchers' attention (e.g. Kopper 2021; Malmvig 2023; Brassett, Browning and Wedderburn 2021). Sometimes, it can ease the tension, creating an amusing atmosphere. On the other hand, some tactics will be adopted as evasion to mitigate the face-threat or conflict and try to be "polite", especially metaphor. However studies on humorous metaphors in diplomacy especially including digital platforms remain scarce. Only Chernobrov (2022) has categorized three types of strategic humor and analyzed the functions they serve in Russian diplomacy.

With the gap, we have ground to focus on different strategic humorous metaphors in varied settings of diplomacy and address the metaphorical implicature behind them.

2. RELATED WORK

There are numerous studies on humor, like the influences of varied humor styles on depression investigated by Cheung and Xiao (2013) and Yue (2017). Olah and Ford (2021) examine how the humor styles become the indicator of their reaction to COVID-19. A few involve humor and political discourse, e.g. humor can end conflict in Neal and Alice (2008). Humor in digital platform has been used as a means to mobilize the public to political participation (Smith & Voth 2012; Kopper 2021).

The number of previous studies which focus on metaphor in diplomatic context is quite limited. Liu and Wang (2020) explore offensive metaphors in Chinese diplomatic discourse from 1954 to 1966, revealing patterns in identity construction and cultural characteristics, reflecting historical and political shifts. Attardo (2017) addresses humorous metaphors from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and unveils the inference pattern behind them.

Cognitive pragmatics is conducive to giving an account of language phenomena. Major research is as follows: Tseng (2021) delves into metonymic schemes in online medical consultation, revealing patterns in evasive replies. It proposes a cognitive-pragmatic model with forces shaping metonymic reasoning. Velasco-Sacrista and

Fuertes-Olivera (2006) explore a critical cognitive-pragmatic approach to gender metaphors in Advertising English, revealing covertly sexist interpretations. It examines subtypes and advocates for awareness and action against negative consequences.

Little research has mainly addressed humor as a diplomatic weapon, nor how it is analyzed from the perspective of cognitive pragmatics. The traditional way to address metaphor through cognitive pragmatics is via relevance theory. However this paper extends previous study by focusing on the research of humorous metaphors in diplomatic discourse. It aims to answer the following research questions:

We harness the cognitive pragmatics framework to address the following questions:

- (1) What kinds of metaphors can be employed as general humorous tactics?
- (2) How can humorous metaphors in China's diplomatic discourse be analyzed via cognitive pragmatics?

3. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

3.1 Humorous Metaphor

Attardo (2017) divided humorous metaphors into three types as follows:

- 1) metaphors that are funny in and of themselves
- 2) metaphors that describe a referent that is inherently funny
- 3) failed metaphors (metaphors that are involuntarily funny, or that are produced pretending to be involuntarily funny)

As for failed metaphors, there are un-metaphors and mixed metaphors, Oring (2003) has proposed a different approach to humorous metaphors, which relies on incongruity and resolution commonly employed in humor theory. According to Oring, metaphors seek to find appropriateness in an incongruous connection between two frames, but they are not humorous because the appropriateness they find is "genuine" (i.e., legitimate), whereas riddles and jokes find "spurious" appropriateness (Oring, 2003: 5) in the connection of two frames. Humor inherently involves non-fully resolved incongruities, whereas metaphors, on the contrary, completely resolve the incongruity in the mapping between domains.

The appropriateness of connections between domains is not sufficient to justify the mapping, making the metaphor humorous. This explanation combines semantic and pragmatic factors: the incongruity of the mapping is a semantic fact, and the research for appropriateness is a pragmatic one (Panther, 2022: 95).

Chernobrov (2022) explored the persuasive application of humor in public diplomacy. He formulated the concept of strategic humor and defined strategic humor as the use of humor by state and proxy actors to promote instrumental interpretations of contested international events to domestic and foreign audiences.

Considering that various humorous metaphors to evoke political effects are influenced by different social and cultural contexts, we categorize humorous metaphors according to their settings and strategies, namely strategic humor proposed by Chernobrov (2022).

3.2 Cognitive Pragmatics

The gist of cognitive pragmatics is their attention to subtle conceptual grounding in motivating, explaining, and shaping language use.

With the combination of cognitive linguistics and pragmatics, Forceville (1996) has rooted his theoretical development within the tenets of the cognitive interactive view of metaphor (Black, 1962) and Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986).

However the relevance of a metaphor to the addressee is established by recovering an array of implicatures.

Implicatures are pragmatic factors. A cognitive pragmatic approach to humorous metaphor will be used to explain implicature recovery, that is, how humor is generated.

Three crucial ideas are assumed in which humorous metaphors in a diplomatic setting are grounded. They are blending theory, mapping, and inference structure between source and target domain.

Blending theory is originated from the work of Fauconnier (1998). Conceptual domain mapping can decode directly mapped domains while blending theory can elaborate the online cognitive process of novel metaphors. That's why we need to take advantage of both. Inference structure starts with presupposition, helping us to recognize the cognitive working mechanism behind the humorous metaphor.

4. HUMOROUS METAPHORS IN CHINESE DIPLOMATIC DISCOURSE

We review three settings of China's strategic humor via metaphor to cover the diversified formats. They are digital media of tweets, press conferences, and the president's public speech.

The assumption that metaphorical meaning is typically embodied is propounded by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) in their book *Metaphors We Live By*. To glimpse the mental spaces that compose the network during the understanding process of humor, we will analyze through a cognitive pragmatic approach which we will illustrate later.

4.1 Multimodal metaphors in digital diplomacy to reach more audience

Digital diplomacy has been described as "nothing less than revolutionary" and a "game changer" (Bjola & Holmes, 2015: 4) for the practice of diplomacy. Functioning as both soft power and an external broadcaster, it serves to acquaint the global audience with the Chinese perspective on significant internal events.

Twitter, a prominent platform in digital diplomacy, facilitates the execution of national foreign policies, enabling connections with a worldwide audience. Recognized as a potent tool for cultivating relationships with foreign audiences online, however digital diplomacy of Twitter, especially the role of ridiculing and humorous posts is significantly underexplored (Chernobrov, 2022).

Mostly, the spokesmen from the foreign ministry rely on multimodal resources to convey the meaning through humorous metaphors. For instance, the USA has imposed many confinements over Huawei. As a Chinese spokesman from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao tweeted:

(1) Huawei has cut Apple into Pieces



Figure 1: Tweet by Spokesman Lijian Zhao from the Foreign Ministry

By metaphorical analogy, the inference is triggered that China's company Huawei is trying to defeat Apple. Spokesmen like Lijian Zhao from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs resorted to more than one picture to show a comparative study of Huawei and Apple. The logo of Huawei has been shown a dominant place over Apple which also reinforces his belief that Huawei is superior to Apple.

It explains why the American government has imposed many confinements over Huawei for fear that it will out-compete Apple.

It is also worth noting that another Chinese spokesman named Chunying Hua tweeted:

(2) "To cooperate or to decouple, they vote with their feet."

"Vote with their feet" means they do not rely on their brain. They make such an important choice as to whether the USA will cooperate with Chinese businesses without thinking. The violation of the default setting of "voting with brain" generates humor.

This metaphor describes inherently funny referents. Many voters voice their opinions just based on their feet, regardless of many American businesses at China International Import Expo. "and more" in the picture shows the huge number of American businesses cooperating with China. Actually Hua could add a funny picture of voting with feet.



Figure 2: Tweet by Spokesman Chunying Hua from the Foreign Ministry

These pictural cases of humorous metaphor demonstrate that Chinese diplomats are trying to use multimodal resources to reach more global and domestic audiences, no matter how it may differ in dissemination.

4.2 Offensive metaphors for the U.S. via humor in the press conference to deflect external criticism

Political press conferences include speeches, interviews, reports, analyses, and debates by political figures (Bhatia 2006). The most interesting aspect of the diplomatic discourse lies in the interviews. The interviews in press conferences rather than other diplomatic discourses will be adopted for diplomatic speakers will not come fully prepared with answers or written to journalists' questions in advance. That is to say, speakers will be regarded as

the main authors of their words in that case. Thus, we chose interviews from press conferences. We refer to this official website https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/.

(3) 彭博社记者:两位美国共和党议员敦促美国国务院保存据称与十几名美国外交官新冠肺炎疫情期间在华遭"限制"有关的文件。这些议员称,中国对美国外交官的"限制"可能对美国国家安全构成潜在威胁。你对此有何评论?

外交部发言人:美方个别议员这种言论和说法荒谬至极,完全是空穴来风,反映出美方个别议员对华认知存在严重问题,**"恐华妄想症"病得不轻**。

Bloomberg: Two US lawmakers are calling on the State Department to save documents that are linked to what they call the "confinement" of more than a dozen American diplomats in China during COVID-19. These Republican lawmakers are saying that China's "confinement" of American diplomats could potentially constitute a national security concern. Does the foreign ministry have any comment on this?

Mao Ning: ... The remarks and narrative of the US lawmakers are simply far-fetched and groundless. They reflect the deeply flawed perception that some US lawmakers have of China and a severe degree of "China-phobia".

China is one kind of severe disease. They seem to self-denigrate themselves. But actually, it denotes the US as a Patient.

(4) 事实上,(美国)自己生病,却让别人吃药,也是没有任何用的。

It's useless to ask others to take pills when the US is ill itself.

PATIENT refers to metaphors involving disease, medicine, and fear. So it explains why (2) and (3) mention the disease or illness and pills.

PERFORMANCE means metaphors involving staff members, stage property, and the nature of the performance. So that's why (4) works.

(5) 美国国内这出**甩锅大戏**已经被严重剧透了,再**演下去**没有意义。奉劝美国国内那些人千万不要**入戏**太深、太沉迷。

The screenplay of this drama in the United States has been badly revealed and there is no point in continuing. A word of advice to certain individuals in the US: Don't be too immersed in and addicted to this play.

The nature of the performance is acting. The scene consisted of behavior is drama. And the result of acting is immersed in this play. All these sub-metaphors compose the national identity of the USA.

LONG ARM transfers the meaning of INTERFERENCE, exemplified in the below sentence:

(6) (美国) 手伸得太长, 容易闪着腰

"If you stretch your arms too much, you might end up hurting your back."

Actually, "long-arm" has not been used only once. This metaphor comes from "long-arm jurisdiction" which comes from the American system. Take New York for instance, the state of New York has a *New York Consolidated Laws, Civil Practice Law, and Rules - CVP*: Acts which are the basis of jurisdiction. As to a cause of action arising from any of the acts enumerated in this section, a court may exercise personal jurisdiction over any non-domiciliary, or his executor or administrator, in person or through an agent. So China uses this "old neologism" through the metaphor to accuse the USA of his interference.

4.3 Vivid metaphors via humor in presidential speeches to show foreign policy

(7)"要坚持通过制度和规则来协调规范各国关系,反对恃强凌弱,不能**谁胳膊粗、拳头大**谁说了算,也不能以多边主义之名、行单边主义之实。"

Strong arm and fist are the symbol of strength. This has established an association between the organ of fighting and its major functions. They are trying to have control of discourse in the world.

President Xi used this metaphor to refer to some countries that want to show their dominant place through war or economic power, where "arm and fist" metaphorically evoke power.

5. TOWARD A COGNITIVE-PRAGMATIC APPROACH TO HUMOROUS METAPHORS IN CHINESE DIPLOMATIC DISCOURSE

5.1 Blending theory

The conceptual domains theory of metaphor primarily deals with codified metaphors, whereas blending theory is more concerned with the real-time processing of novel metaphors, explicitly "cartoons, jokes, newly coined terms, terms we apply in unusual ways" (Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1998).

Blends involve four mental spaces: two input spaces, a generic space, which is the shared information by both input spaces, and finally the blended space, where the interplay between two input spaces. As shown in figure 3 of example (1), there are two input spaces: (1) a person cuts an apple into pieces; (2) company A defeats company B, then company B goes broken. Then in blended space, we have such a metaphor of "Huawei cut Apple into pieces". Another emergent structure will produce: Huwei is trying to defeat Apple.

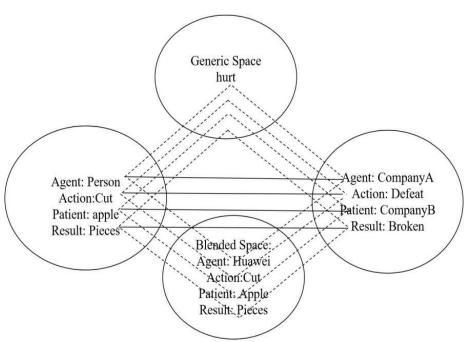


Figure 3: Conceptual blending of "Huawei Cut Apple into Pieces"

The dominant place of Huawei over Apple is pictorially displayed on Lijian Zhao's tweet, which has reinforced the belief of Chinese technology's superior status. Thus, we can symbolically infer that China is laughing the opponent in the face with such a multimodal metaphor. Western sanction against China is based on the fear of a growing China.

5.2 Mapping between source and target domain

"Metaphor is a model of reasoning that relates two conceptual frames, a source frame and a target frame where its former imposes its conceptual structure on the latter" (Panther 2022). The relationship between the source and target frame is a case of iconicity. Metaphorical Mapping BEHAVIOR topology onto PERFORMANCE topology. The sub metaphors are based on our world knowledge, also called "encyclopedic knowledge", in other words, in the PERFORMANCE frame as below.

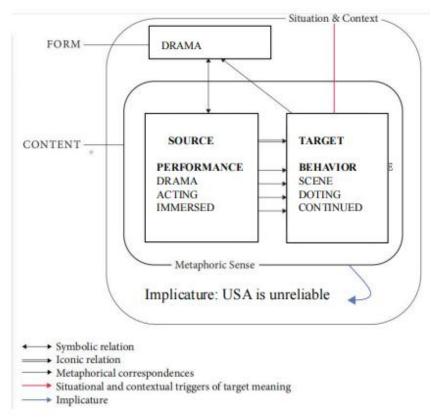


Figure 4: Some mappings of the metaphor BEHAVIOR→PERFORMANCE

The implicature that the USA is unreliable can be triggered. By frequently using the sub metaphors of PERFORMANCE, China is trying to reinforce the construction of the USA's national identity as a funny actor, untrustworthy.

5.3 Inferential structure between source and target domain

In this section, we'll demonstrate the degree to which metaphorical mappings maintain the inferential structure of the source frame within the target frame, as exemplified in (4):

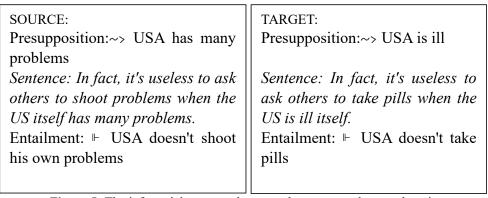


Figure 5: The inferential structure between the source and target domain

Notice the entailment associated with (4). This metaphor stands up to Western political and media hegemony. It pushes out a dual message: (1) the USA is full of problems and (2) criticism of the USA on external inference. Similarly, (3) is also a PATIENT metaphor. Thus, the notion is sarcasm towards the USA, further ridiculing the claim of our control or confinement over American people during COVID-19.

6. CONCLUSION

These humorous devices are best analyzed through a cognitive-pragmatic approach. The above examples provide us supporting evidence that humorous metaphor in Chinese diplomatic discourse lies not only in the settlement of a specific problem but also in the construction of their national image. In the Chinese diplomatic context, especially a crisis represents not a dilemma but an opportunity for them to shape their culture or power, winning more international supporters, especially from some neutral states.

First, the use of metaphorical framing can shape people's cognitive processes.

Then, the cogntive pragmatic approach uncovers the diplomat's conversational implicature and political intentions, to make them more obvious to the target audience.

Last but not least, this research calls for action on the humor to dissolve the crisis or deflect the external criticism for it is the cheapest way to overcome the negative consequences in a diplomatic context.

There are also some limitations of this study. Metonymy within Chinese humorous diplomatic discourse is quite evident. "Arm and fist" actually belong to the organ of fighting, which is also part of metonymy. We hope that further research will focus on the metonymy scheme of humor in diplomatic discourse.

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