

Original Paper

The Pragmatic Value and Innovative Use of Puns in Chinese Network Context

Shuo Yang¹ & Xiaoyu Zhang²

¹ Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

² Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xi'an, China

Received: October 11, 2024 Accepted: October 25, 2024 Online Published: November 12, 2024

doi:10.22158/sll.v8n4p188

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sll.v8n4p188>

Abstract

With the rapid development of Internet technology and the widespread adoption of social media, the forms of language use in the network context have become increasingly diverse. Puns, as a unique rhetorical device, play a significant role in this environment. This paper delves into the pragmatic value and innovative use of puns in Chinese within the network context, analyzing their roles in enhancing humor, promoting implicitness, enriching diversity, and facilitating cultural exchange and integration. At the same time, this paper also addresses the challenges and issues faced by puns in the network context and proposes corresponding countermeasures. Through this research, we aim to provide new perspectives and directions for thinking in the study of network language, further promoting its development and application.

Keywords

puns, network context, pragmatic value, innovative use, language norms, cultural exchange

1. Introduction

With the proliferation of the Internet and the rise of social media, the forms of language use in the network context have gradually enriched, exhibiting unique charm and value. Among them, puns, as a common rhetorical device, have been widely used in the network context, demonstrating unique pragmatic value and innovative application methods. This paper aims to explore the pragmatic value and innovative use of puns in Chinese within the network context, providing new perspectives and considerations for the study of network language.

2. Definition and Classification of Puns

Puns, as a rhetorical device, refer to the use of the phonetic, morphological, and semantic characteristics of words to give a sentence or passage two or more meanings, achieving humorous, ironic, implicit, and other expressive effects. In Chinese, puns can be classified into various types, such as homophonic puns, semantic puns, and contextual puns.

The author conducted a statistical analysis of the Chinese editorial department of “Biting Words and Writing” released the annual statistics of the top ten popular words from 2013 to 2023 and generated the following statistical graph using MATLAB.

2.1 Homophonic Puns

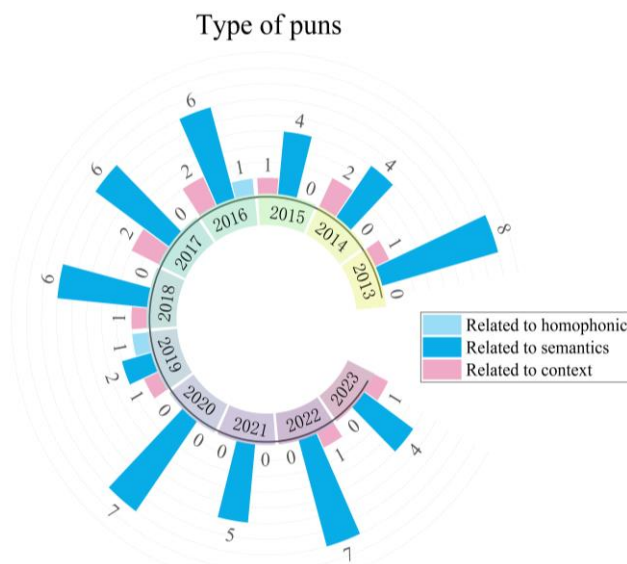
Homophonic puns are formed through the homophonic relationship between words. In the network context, homophonic puns are popular due to their brevity and humor. For example, “dog die” (gou dai) can be understood as both “go die” and “enough attitude”, which is both concise and vivid. Another example is “lanshou xianggu”, a homophonic expression for “nanshou xiangku” (want to cry, feeling bad), which quickly became a popular phrase on the internet.

2.2 Semantic Puns

Semantic puns are formed through the polysemy or ambiguity of words. In the network context, semantic puns are often used to express complex and subtle emotions or attitudes. For instance, “high energy ahead” can be interpreted as both “danger ahead” and “a large amount of energy being released ahead”, which is a concise and expressive way of speaking. Another example is “old driver”, which in the network context refers to both someone with extensive driving experience and someone experienced and familiar with routines in certain fields, making this pun both humorous and implicit.

2.3 Contextual Puns

Contextual puns are formed through the meaning of words or cultural background in a specific context. In the network context, contextual puns are often used to create humorous and ironic effects. For example, “the boat of friendship can capsize at any moment” is commonly used to describe situations where friends have conflicts due to minor issues, which is both humorous and philosophical. Another example is “routine”, which in the network context is used to describe a fixed pattern or method, as well as the skills and means used by someone when doing something, making this pun both suitable for the network context and able to resonate with readers.



According to the above chart, from 2013 to 2023, puns accounted for no less than 50% of the annual buzzwords in nine years in Chinese mainstream media magazines, totaling 73 puns. Among them, 59 puns were semantically related, accounting for 80.82% of the total puns in buzzwords. However, homophonic puns and contextual puns accounted for less than 20%. This phenomenon is closely related to the social value of language and language norms. Shi Junnan, the editor-in-chief of the magazine, said, “Considering that homophonic puns have a short lifespan, are greatly influenced by context, and have low linguistic value, they are rarely selected as buzzwords”. At the same time, he advocated language norms. When selecting buzzwords, one should enhance the beauty of the mother tongue by choosing elegant, beautiful, and pure language symbols that conform to the structural laws and grammatical norms of Chinese. For example, the alphabetic word “yyds” is not a pure Chinese word, and similar ones include yygq, gkd, xswl, and emo. Another example is the highly popular “juejuezi”, which has an obvious “gamification” tendency in its composition and deviates from typical Chinese word-formation rules. “Duoshun” is a pure homophonic string with no linguistic value and was eliminated in the first round of screening.

3. Pragmatic Value of Puns in the Network Context

The pragmatic value of puns in the network context is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

3.1 Enhancing Humor in Language Expression

Puns have become a highlight of the network context due to their unique humor. By cleverly using puns, netizens can express their views and attitudes in a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. For example, the ancient saying “every man is mortal; let his loyalty shine through history” is parodied in the network context as “every man is mortal; you’ll die sooner or later”, which is both humorous and philosophical, resonating with readers. Another example is “xianggu lanshou”, which quickly became a popular

phrase on the internet due to its humorous homophonic expression of “xiangku nanshou”.

3.2 Improving the Implicitness of Language Expression

Puns can also improve the implicitness of language expression in the network context. By using puns, netizens can express their opinions and views more euphemistically, avoiding direct conflicts and contradictions. For instance, “your IQ balance is low; please recharge promptly” is commonly used in the network context to euphemistically remind someone to improve their knowledge or thinking ability, which is both implicit and inspiring.

3.3 Enriching the Diversity of Language Expression

The widespread use of puns in the network context enriches the diversity of language expression. By cleverly using puns, netizens can create more vivid and interesting expressions, making language more infectious and expressive. For example, “old driver” enriches the expressive forms of network language by referring to both someone with extensive driving experience and someone experienced and familiar with routines in certain fields, making this pun both humorous and implicit.

3.4 Promoting Cultural Exchange and Integration

As a unique language phenomenon, puns not only reflect the characteristics and charm of Chinese but also facilitate cultural exchange and integration. In the network context, netizens from different regions and cultural backgrounds communicate and interact using puns, enhancing mutual understanding and friendship. For example, “onlookers” is commonly used in the network context to describe netizens who are watching a certain event or topic, which is both suitable for the network context and able to transcend regional and cultural differences, resonating with readers.

4. Innovative Use of Puns in the Network Context

The innovative use of puns in the network context is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

4.1 Combining with Current Events

Puns in the network context are often used in combination with current events to express netizens’ views and attitudes towards a certain event or topic. For example, during the fight against the pandemic, “wearing a mask” became an important protective measure in people’s daily lives. Netizens cleverly used puns to associate and compare “wearing a mask” with “wearing a green hat”, expressing their emphasis on epidemic prevention measures and their irony and criticism of irresponsible behavior. This innovative use is both suitable for the network context and able to resonate with readers.

4.2 Combining with Network Buzzwords

Network buzzwords are an important component of the network context, characterized by brevity, vividness, and interestingness. The innovative use of puns in the network context often combines with network buzzwords. For example, “onlookers” is commonly used in the network context to describe netizens who are watching a certain event or topic. Netizens cleverly used puns to associate and compare “onlookers” with “the knife skills of onlookers”, expressing their irony and criticism of

certain irresponsible remarks or behaviors. This innovative use is both suitable for the network context and able to enhance the humor and irony of language expression.

4.3 Combining with Network Culture

Network culture is an important component of the network context, possessing unique charm and value. The innovative use of puns in the network context often combines with network culture. For example, “troll” is commonly used in the network context to describe someone who enjoys arguing and 争议 with others. Netizens cleverly used puns to associate and compare “troll” with “steel bar”, expressing their irony and criticism of such people. This innovative use is both suitable for the network context and able to resonate with readers, while also reflecting the unique charm of network culture.

4.4 Combining with Personal Experiences

Puns in the network context can also be used in combination with personal experiences to express individual emotions and opinions. For example, “life is like a play, all relying on acting” is commonly used in the network context to describe people’s performance in social situations. Netizens can cleverly use puns to associate and compare their personal experiences with this saying, expressing their views and attitudes towards life. This innovative use is both suitable for the network context and able to enhance the personality and infectivity of language expression.

5. Challenges and Countermeasures of Puns in the Online Context

5.1 Despite the Unique Pragmatic Value and Innovative Application of Puns in the Online Context, They also Face Several Challenges and Issues

5.1.1 Misunderstanding and Ambiguity

Due to their multiple meanings and complexity, puns can easily lead to misunderstanding and ambiguity. In the online context, differences in cultural backgrounds and language habits among netizens may result in varied interpretations of puns. Therefore, when using puns, it is important to avoid causing misunderstanding and ambiguity, ensuring accuracy and clarity in expression.

5.1.2 Language Violence

Puns in the online context can sometimes be used for language violence or attacking others. Some netizens may exploit the cleverness of puns to mask their malicious or offensive remarks, thereby damaging the reputation and rights of others. Hence, when using puns, it is crucial to refrain from using offensive or malicious remarks, respecting the rights and dignity of others.

5.1.3 Overuse

Excessive use of puns in the online context may lead to monotonous and uninteresting language expression. Some netizens may overuse puns in pursuit of humor or novelty, resulting in a lack of diversity and depth in language expression. Therefore, when using puns, it is necessary to use them moderately, avoiding over-reliance and abuse.

5.2 To Address the Above Challenges and Issues, the Following Countermeasures Can be Taken:

5.2.1 Strengthen Language Education

Strengthening language education is one of the important measures to address the challenges of puns. By enhancing language education, netizens' language literacy and expressive abilities can be improved, enabling them to better understand and apply puns. Additionally, it can cultivate netizens' critical thinking and independent thinking abilities, preventing them from being misled by malicious or offensive remarks.

5.2.2 Establish Regulatory Mechanisms

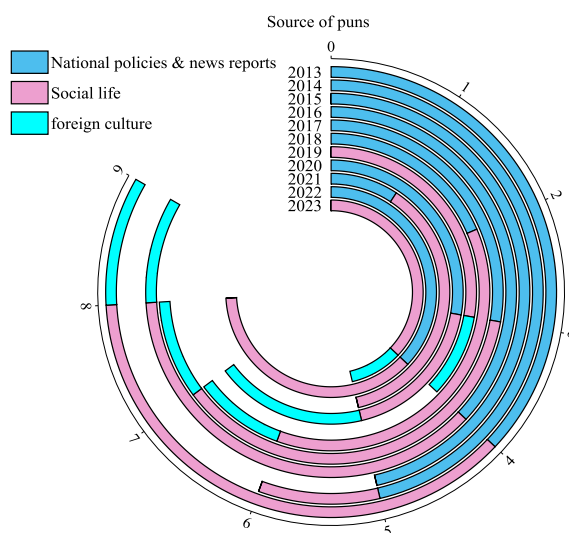
Establishing regulatory mechanisms is another crucial measure to address the challenges of puns. By formulating relevant norms and standards, the scope of use and limiting conditions for puns can be clarified, preventing them from being used for malicious or offensive remarks. Meanwhile, the supervision and management of online language can be strengthened to maintain the health and civilization of the online context.

5.2.3 Advocate Civilized Communication

Advocating civilized communication is another important way to address the challenges of puns. By advocating civilized communication, netizens' politeness and respect awareness can be cultivated, avoiding the use of offensive or malicious remarks. Furthermore, netizens can be encouraged to actively participate in online discussions and exchange activities, jointly creating a healthy, positive, and upward online atmosphere.

The following chart shows the source statistics of puns in the "Top Ten Buzzwords of the Year from 2013 to 2023" released by Yao Wen Jiao Zi. It can be seen that there are 26 puns originating from "national policies and news reports", accounting for 35.62%. There are 39 puns from "social life", accounting for 53.42%. Additionally, there are 8 puns derived from "foreign culture", representing 10.96% of the total.

From this, it can be concluded that the primary source of puns in online buzzwords is "social life", which reflects the social nature of language. Language is not only a symbolic system for exchanging information but also carries rich socio-cultural information. Language is behavior, and language is social life itself. Therefore, selecting puns from buzzwords is not only about choosing an instrumental symbol but also about discerning the value information within them in accordance with social and moral norms of civilization. The secondary source is "national policies and news reports". As an important component of social language and a vital medium used across language communities, puns must consciously adhere to the standardization of Chinese. Puns in buzzwords should not only reflect the characteristics of the times but also promote positive energy, leaving an imprint on social life for the year.



6. Conclusion

As a unique rhetorical device, puns demonstrate unique pragmatic value and innovative application in the online context. By cleverly using puns, netizens can express their views and attitudes in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, enriching the diversity of language expression and promoting cultural exchange and integration. However, puns in the online context also face challenges and issues, such as misunderstanding and ambiguity, language violence, and overuse. Therefore, when using puns, it is necessary to avoid causing misunderstanding and ambiguity, respect the rights and dignity of others, use them moderately, and avoid over-reliance and abuse. At the same time, measures such as strengthening language education, establishing regulatory mechanisms, and advocating civilized communication are also needed to address the challenges and issues posed by puns.

References

- Fu, Z. Y. (2022). The “Grassroots” Logic as a Pun: Chinese Contemporary Sculpture in the Digital Age. *Art Work*, (02), 38-42.
- Huang, Y. (2021). A Cognitive Study of Chinese Advertising Puns. *Modern Communication*, (18), 97-100.
- Huang, Y. H., Xiao, Y. K., Chu, X. Y. et al. (2024). Semantics or Homophony: The Matching between Brand Personality and Types of Pun. *Acta Psychologica Sinica*, 56(11), 1604-1618.
- Lin, Y. M. (2021). A Cognitive Perspective on Puns and Metaphors in the Context of Anti-epidemic Efforts. *Journal of Huzhou Teachers College*, 43(05), 101-106.
- Shi, H. G. (2015). Observing the Trends of Contemporary Language Evolution through the Generalization of Puns in New Media. *Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, (23), 59-61+97.

Wu, F. L., & Li, L. C. (2020). Conceptual Integration in Puns. *Modern English*, (22), 99-101.