

Exploring Ambiguity Based on the Grammatical Differences between Chinese and English

Feng Li

School of Foreign Language, Jinling Institute of Technology, Nanjing, China

**Corresponding Author: Feng Li, School of Foreign Language, Jinling Institute of Technology, Nanjing, China*

ABSTRACT

Natural language is highly ambiguous, i.e. linguistic ambiguity is very common at every level --- phonological, lexical, pragmatic and syntactic. This is true of both English and Chinese. Being two widely different languages, English and Chinese possess distinctive grammatical features. This article explores ambiguity from the perspective of grammatical differences between Chinese and English, and identifies the interesting finding that a syntactically ambiguous expression in one language may be perspicuous when put in the other; in other words, syntactic ambiguity in one language may be avoided when expressed in the other.

Keywords: *syntactic ambiguity; grammatical differences; Chinese; English.*

INTRODUCTION

Chinese is distinct from English in many aspects, e.g., in writing systems (the former ideography, the latter phonography) and in pronunciation systems (the former characterized by single-syllable words and four tones: level, rising, falling and rising, and falling, the latter featured with many multi-syllable words, stress, and intonation). However, the most complicated and intriguing difference between the two may lie in how they are organized to express or to communicate, i.e. in their grammatical structures, which, undoubtedly, have much to do with their speakers' thought and thinking styles.

People's perception and thought about their living environment has a great influence on their lexicon (e.g. abundance or scarcity of some types of terminology), and their language's implicature (e.g. "red" possesses very positive implications of "prosperity, jubilation and fortune" in Chinese besides referring to a color). In the case of grammatical structures, people's thought and thinking styles play an important role as well. Nisbett (2003: 27) found that the Chinese have developed a type of dialectical thought that seeks to use contradiction to

understand relations and to see things in their appropriate contexts, which means that events do not occur in isolation from other events, but are instead embedded in a meaningful whole, while a Western dialectic is very "aggressive" in seeking to decontextualize and resolve contradictions.

The Chinese scholar Peng and his colleagues (2006: 256) proposed that in Western dialectical thinking, which is fundamentally consistent with the laws of formal logic, contradiction requires synthesis rather than mere acceptance, while in Chinese naive dialecticism does not regard contradiction as illogical and tends to accept the contradictions in a harmoniously unified way.

Simply speaking, Western thought is characterized by being rule- or law-orientated, detailed, analytical and logical, while Chinese thought is featured with context or situation specific, holistic, intuitive, and compatible. We cannot conclude what exactly Chinese language structure is supposed to be, but the Chinese thinking style tells us that its structure probably imposes less emphasis on grammatical forms, and more on language contexts and on wholeness of objects and events. Western

thinking style determines that the grammar of English may be analytical, logical and less dependent on context, which requires it to possess some grammatical forms so that messages can be understood correctly even isolated from contexts. Tense for verbs, as one of the salient differences in grammar between Chinese and English, can offer us more insight and understanding. English verbs change their forms in different temporal situations. In other words, the form of one verb can roughly tell us that it happened, happens or will happen. In Chinese, comparatively, verbs remain unchanged formally in any situations, so we have to resort to extra adverbs to discern a past event, a present event or a future event.

e.g. 他（昨天）吃一个苹果。

He **ate** an apple (yesterday).

他（每天）吃一个苹果。

He **eats** an apple (every day).

他（明天）吃一个苹果。

He **will eat** an apple (tomorrow).

The Chinese verb ‘吃’ (eat) remains the same formally no matter whether yesterday, tomorrow or every day while the English verb ‘eat’ changes accordingly in different tenses. The three forms of ‘eat’ can reveal the approximate time of this behavior even without the time adverbs ‘yesterday’, ‘every day’ or ‘tomorrow’. Actually, besides verbs, there is no formal change for Chinese nouns, adjectives or pronouns as well. This feature of no formal change in Chinese seems to contribute much to Chinese ambiguity.

It is commonly accepted that natural language is highly ambiguous phonologically, lexically, and structurally. Ambiguity is generally taken to be a property possessed by signs that bear multiple interpretations. According to Wasow et al. (2005: 265), “an expression is ambiguous if it has two or more distinct denotations --- that is, if it is associated with more than one region of meaning space.” Ambiguity is constitutive of communication and productive in legal, political, philosophical, literary discourses. Kennedy (2011: 508) defines ambiguity as a subtype of uncertainty “which manifests itself as variation in truth conditions: one and the same

utterance token can be judged true of one situation, or the other way around, depending on how it is interpreted.” In this sense, ambiguity has been the source of much frustration, bemusement and amusement for philosophers, linguists, cognitive scientists, authors, poets, etc. Nowadays, many ambiguous expressions have emerged in Chinese internet and Chinese people’s life for the purpose of irony, sarcasm, self-mocking, etc. Interestingly, many of these Chinese ambiguous expressions would not be ambiguous at all if they were put in English, which can be accounted for structurally based on the grammatical differences between Chinese and English. This article intends to explore these ambiguous expressions based on the grammatical differences between Chinese and English.

ANALYSES ON AMBIGUITY BASED ON GRAMMATICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

People’s perception and understanding of their living environment exerts a great influence on what terminology they like to use, what implications they prefer, and even what structure they employ to communicate subconsciously. Understandably, there are both similarities and differences in how people perceive and understand their world across cultures. Therefore, we can find out that languages always have something in common even though obvious variations arise across them.

Chinese and English are so distinctive that it is not appropriate to parse all Chinese sentences by resorting to English grammar. But apparently, Chinese is in possession of as many content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns, etc. as English. More importantly, many sentential structures (such as SVO) are displayed similarly between Chinese and English. Therefore, some Chinese ambiguous sentences can be understood easily by English speakers, e.g.

On the subway, a girl is speaking to her boyfriend on the phone.

如果你到了，我没到，你等着；

If you get there but I am not there, you wait;

如果我到了，你没到，你等着！

If I get there but you are not there, you wait.

The same expression ‘你等着’ (you wait) has two different denotations, one normal meaning of ‘wait’, the other carrying a threatening implication. Despite different languages, the humor of this ambiguous sentence can be perceived and appreciated easily by speakers of both languages. However, there are also many differences between the two languages which may produce some expressions ambiguous in one language but perspicuous in the other. As analyzed in the first part, Chinese is holistic and inferential, so its interpretation depends greatly on context or situation, which is different from English, a language analytical and logical even in isolation. Let’s take a simple example to explain.

他是我的男朋友。

He be my boyfriend.

This Chinese sentence is ambiguous if not put in a certain context or if not given extra complementation of ‘time’. In English the sentence should be expressed as:

He is my boyfriend.

他（现在now）是我的男朋友。

Or

He was my boyfriend.

他（曾经before）是我的男朋友。

In Chinese, ‘是’ (be) remains unchanged formally wherever and whenever the situation takes place. In order to clearly understand the sentence, the reader or listener has to rely on context or further explanation. Relatively, with specific formal changes of ‘be’ in different tenses, English sentences both sound and look less ambiguous, even in isolated situation.

Through comparison, we can find that, unlike English, Chinese nouns do not have plural forms, Chinese verbs do not possess inflectional changes (say, past tense, present participle, past participle, third person singular), Chinese adjectives do not own comparative degree or superlative degree, and Chinese pronouns do not contain the objective case, subjective case or possessive case, though both languages share nouns, verbs, adjectives and pronouns. Without such grammatical features as English but with much ellipsis, some Chinese sentences appear ambiguous if without context. But if expressed

in English, ambiguity disappears. Some illustrations are demonstrated below.

No Plural Forms for Nouns

她做了两个孩子爱吃的的菜。

In Chinese, nouns remain the same formally, whether for plural meaning or for singular meaning, just revealed as ‘孩子’ (kid) and ‘菜’ (dish) in this sentence. So, it is difficult to judge whether the previous quantifier ‘两个’ (two) modifies ‘孩子’ (two kids) or ‘菜’ (two dishes). Thus, ambiguity arises in this sentence. If in English, there would be less ambiguity.

She cooked two kids’ favorite dish.

Or:

She cooked two kid’s favorite dishes.

No Case Changes for Pronouns

Chinese pronouns do not distinguish subjective case from objective case. Usually, the position of one pronoun shows that it is a subject or an object.

For example:

我喜欢读书。

I like reading.

妈妈喜欢我。

Mum likes me.

Put in front of the sentence, ‘我’ is in subjective case ‘I’, while behind a transitive verb, it is in objective case ‘me’. But as for the question pronoun ‘谁’, the same as other pronouns, it carries both the subjective case (who) and the objective case (whom) in the single form. The only difference lies in that this pronoun may sometimes stay in front of a sentence for emphasis no matter whether it is a subject or an object. In this case, especially together with the most common phenomenon ‘ellipsis’ in Chinese, ambiguity takes place easily. For instance:

我最佩服两个球队，

一是中国乒乓球队，谁都赢不了！

另一个是中国男足，谁都赢不了！

Two teams I admire most:

One is China Pingpong team, whoever cannot defeat **(them)**!

The other is China male soccer team, whomever **(they)** cannot defeat!

In the parentheses is the elliptical information. The absolutely same Chinese expression ‘谁都赢不了’ can be interpreted in two ways when placed in two contexts. The first expresses great pride in China Pingpong team, while the latter exposes extreme disappointment and irony to China male soccer team. But when translated into English, with proper pronouns used and added, no ambiguity occurs at all.

One more interesting example:

我单身的原因有两个:

一是: 谁都看不上;

二是: 谁都看不上。

Watching the two expressions ‘谁都看不上’, no difference at all, we inevitably encounter ambiguity here. Let’s look at the English expressions:

There are two reasons why I am still single:

One is whoever does not take a fancy to (**me**);

The other is whomever (**I**) do not take fancy to.

The same as the previous example, in the parentheses are two elliptical pronouns and ‘谁’ takes on both cases (whoever and whomever) in the single form. Apparently, implication of self-mocking and humor emerges from the ambiguous expressions.

No Formal Distinction between Verbs and Nouns

Because there are no formal changes in verbs or nouns in Chinese, it is quite common to confuse a verb with a noun in a Chinese sentence if isolated from a certain context. Just like ‘smile’ in English, ‘微笑’ can be a verb as well as a noun. But in English, ‘smile’ can be clearly distinguished as a verb from a noun when it appears in a grammatical form, say, ‘smiled’ or ‘smiling’, even isolated syntactically. This is not the case for ‘微笑’. Wherever it appears, it always remains the unchanged forms. So, syntactical context or more information is needed to interpret whether it is a verb or a noun. Accordingly, sometimes ambiguity happens when verbs and nouns are put together, for you are not convinced whether there are two nouns or there is one verb followed by a noun. Similarly, English grammar can remove the ambiguity here.

e.g. 领导(n. or v.) 群众(n.)

The Leader and the masses

Or:

Lead the masses

e.g. 阅读(n. or v.) 材料(n.)

Comprehension materials

Or:

Read the materials

e.g. 这个门没有锁。

‘锁’ in Chinese is similar to ‘lock’ in English, functioning either as a noun or as a verb. But unfortunately, Chinese ‘锁’ has no formal changes, which makes readers confused about whether ‘锁’ in the sentence is a noun or a verb. Thereby, this sentence can be interpreted as:

The door does not have a lock.

Or:

The door is not locked.

Nouns and verbs take up the largest proportion both in English and Chinese. The fact that there is no any formal change for nouns and verbs in Chinese brings about much ambiguity when a word can act as both a noun and a verb. In the same case, English expressions may be not ambiguous at all, because the different grammatical forms for English nouns and verbs can facilitate understanding English structure clearly.

The Position of an Attributive Clause

Here is another ambiguity that can be explored from the perspective of grammatical difference between Chinese and English --- the position of attributive clauses, which does not concern formal changes of a word, but, in a larger level, the structure of a sentence. Usually, if an attributive modifier is only made up of one or two adjectives, it is placed in front of a noun to modify the latter, which is also true of Chinese. But longer or more complicated attributive modifiers, especially the attributive clauses, in English generally are placed behind the nouns while almost all attributive modifiers including the attributive clauses in Chinese still remain in front of the nouns. It is worth mentioning again that, just like Chinese verbs and Chinese nouns, so-called Chinese adjectives are not discernible by their forms. Formally, they are apt to be confused with nouns, just like verbs. Only when the auxiliary word ‘的’ is attached behind can

we conclude that this word is not a noun but an adjective.

e.g. A **(beautiful)** flower

一朵 (美丽的) 花

‘Beautiful’ is an adjective, while ‘美丽’ can be treated either as a noun, meaning ‘beauty,’ or as an adjective, meaning ‘beautiful’. Of course, in this case, ‘美丽’, with the auxiliary word ‘的’ attached to it, is surely an adjective. So, when the attributive modifier is as simple as one or two adjectives, as illustrated in the above sentences, they are placed in front of the noun whether in English or in Chinese. However, in Chinese the auxiliary word ‘的’ can be put behind one single abstract noun to demonstrate an adjective, and also can be placed behind an attributive clause to reveal a longer or complicated attributive modifier. Thereby, sometimes ambiguity emerges in Chinese when an attributive clause modifies a noun, for the reader may be bewildered at distinguishing adjectives from nouns.

First example:

放弃美丽的女人让人心碎

This sentence can be parsed in two ways:

- 1). [(放弃美丽)的女人]让人心碎
- 2). [放弃(美丽的女人)]让人心碎

In sentence 1), ‘美丽’ is a noun meaning ‘beauty’. ‘放弃美丽’ meaning ‘abandon beauty’ is a Chinese attributive clause to modify the following ‘女人’ (woman). But in sentence 2), ‘美丽’ is an adjective meaning ‘beautiful’ modifying ‘女人’ (woman). Thus, this Chinese sentence can be interpreted as:

- 1). The woman who abandons beauty is heartbreaking.
- 2). It is heartbreaking to abandon a beautiful woman.

Second example:

咬死了猎人的狗

This expression, without any adjective, is composed of one verb (咬死了 meaning ‘killed by biting’), two nouns (猎人 ‘hunter’ and 狗 ‘hound’), and one auxiliary word (的). It also can be parsed in two ways:

- 3). [(咬死了猎人)的狗]
- 4). [咬死了(猎人的狗)]

In 3), ‘咬死了猎人’ (killed the hunter), followed by the auxiliary word ‘的’, is an attributive clause to modify the noun ‘狗’ (the hound). In 4), ‘猎人的狗’ (the hunter’s hound), as a whole part, is put behind the verb ‘咬死了’ (killed), functioning as an object. In this parsing, the auxiliary word ‘的’ after a concrete content noun ‘猎人’ (the hunter) demonstrates a possessive case ‘猎人的’ (the hunter’s) to explain the hound’s ownership. Hereby, Interpretations go as:

- 3). It was the hound which killed the hunter.
- 4). The hunter’s hound was killed.

Seen from these two examples, Chinese expressions with attributive clauses are likely to elicit ambiguity in comprehension because Chinese attributive clauses stand before the nouns they intend to modify, which frequently results in different parsing of the same expression. However, this type of ambiguity deriving from the position of attributive clauses can be avoided in English grammar. Especially in the second example, the elliptical sentence 4) is acceptable in Chinese regardless of the lack of a definite subject, which would be too ungrammatical to be existent in written English.

In turn, some syntactically ambiguous English sentences, if expressed in Chinese, would not be ambiguous at all. The position of the components in a Chinese sentence plays an important role in interpreting the sentence. For example, whether the pronoun ‘我’ is a subject ‘I’ or an object ‘me’ depends on whether it is placed before a verb or after a verb, but ‘我’ remains unchanged formally wherever it goes. So, to some extent, we can say the components in a Chinese sentence are not form sensitive but position sensitive. Some components of an English sentence, such as attributive modifiers, adverbial modifiers, and even some clauses, are very free and flexible as to their positions in the sentence, compared with their counterparts of a Chinese sentence. These components in English can be put in front of the sentence, behind the sentence and even in between the sentence, which does not affect the interpretation of the sentence in most cases.

e.g. Mary, as well as her brother, goes to school on foot every day.

Mary goes to school on foot every day as well

as her brother.

The two sentences mean the same, though the adverbial modifier ‘as well as her brother’ is placed differently in each. However, sometimes the position flexibility may bring about confusion about which part the modifier actually intends to modify.

e.g. Tom hit the boy with a ball.

In this sentence, is ‘with a ball’ an adverbial modifier to modify ‘how Tom hit’ or an attributive modifier for ‘the boy’? In this case, ambiguity arises. But in a Chinese sentence, attributive modifiers and adverbial modifiers usually are placed in the positions they should be. If the position changed, new interpretation might arise, because a modifier in a Chinese sentence is only to modify the noun closest to it. Therefore, if in Chinese, this syntactic ambiguous English sentence would not be ambiguous at all.

Tom hit (the boy with a ball.)

汤姆打了(拿球的男孩)。

In Chinese, ‘with a ball’ can only modify the noun closest to it, i.e. ‘the boy’, not the farther one ‘Tom’. If we want the other interpretation, we will have to reposition ‘with a ball’ as:

(Tom with a ball) hit the boy.

(汤姆用球) 打了那个男孩。

Very interestingly, the flexibility of placing attributive modifiers or adverbial modifiers in English sentences may contribute to syntactic ambiguity while the rigid restraint of placing attributive modifiers or adverbial modifiers in Chinese sentences tend to help avoid this type of ambiguity.

CONCLUSIONS

Language is for communication and transmission. But intriguingly, almost all natural languages are highly ambiguous. So, Grice (1975: 30) proposed ‘Avoid ambiguity’ as one of the maxims falling under the general category of ‘Manner’. Nevertheless, no matter whether in written discourses or in spoken utterances, ambiguity arises phonologically, lexically, pragmatically, and syntactically. Most ambiguity happens unintentionally while some ambiguity appears deliberately for the sake of irony,

sarcasm or self-mocking. In either way, ambiguity is not avoided in communication. As Wasow said (2015), ‘ambiguity avoidance is overrated’. So, many researchers (Levinson, 2000; Piantadosi et al., 2012) tried to explain why natural languages are ambiguous. This article explored ambiguity from a novel perspective --- the grammatical differences between Chinese and English.

Chinese is a language with little emphasis on forms of verbs or nouns, and its perception and comprehension impose great dependence on the holistic context or situation in which an utterance or sentence takes place. I DO NOT KNOW WHAT HOLISTIC MEANS HERE OR WHAT IT CONTRASTS WITH. The fact that no tense attaches to verbs, no plural changes to nouns, no formal distinction across nouns, verbs and even adjectives, etc. gives rise to some unique sorts of ambiguity in Chinese. Apart from that, the common phenomenon in Chinese --- ellipsis strengthens the possibility and the degree of Chinese ambiguity. In any Chinese discourse we can find many short sentences with subjects, or objects, or pronouns omitted. Without a certain context, these ambiguous Chinese expressions are difficult to interpret exactly. However, if put in English, these expressions are not ambiguous at all due to this language’s distinct grammatical features from Chinese. Interestingly, in some cases, the rigid restraint on the position of attributive modifiers and adverbial modifiers in Chinese sentences seems to make less ambiguous expressions than in English.

Therefore, from the perspective of grammatical differences between English and Chinese, a syntactically ambiguous expression in one language may be very perspicuous if put in the other; in other words, syntactic ambiguity in one language may be avoided when expressed in the other, which is the chief research interest of this article.

REFERENCES

- [1] Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In Peter Cole & Jerry L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: speech acts* (pp. 26-40). New York: Academic Press.
- [2] Kennedy, C. (2011). Ambiguity and vagueness. In C. Maienborn, P. Portner & K. von Stechow (Eds.), *Handbook of semantics*. The

- Hague: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [3] Levinson, S. C. (2000). *Presumptive meanings: the theory of generalized conversational implicature*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- [4] Piantadosi, S. T., Harry Tily & Edward Gibson. (2012). The communicative function of ambiguity in language. *Cognition* 122, 280-291.
- [5] Nisbett, R. E. (2003). *The Geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently and why*. New York: Free Press.
- [6] Peng, K., Spencer-Rodgers, J., & Nian, Z. (2006). Naive dialecticism and the Tao of Chinese thought. In U. Kim, K. S. Yang, & K. K. Hwang (Eds.), *Indigenous and cultural psychology: Understanding people in context* (pp. 247-262). New York: Springer.
- [7] Wasow, T., Amy Perfors & David Beaver (2005). The puzzle of ambiguity. In C. Orthan Orgun & Peter Sells (Eds.), *Morphology and the web of grammar* (pp. 265-282). Stanford: CSLI Publications.
- [8] Wasow, T. (2015). Ambiguity avoidance is overrated. In Susanne Winkler (Ed.), *Ambiguity: language and communication* (pp. 29-47). Berlin/Boston, DE: De Gruyter Mouton.