

Chinese Xiehouyu (歇后语) and the interpretation of metaphor and metonymy

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Xiehouyu is a unique linguistic phenomenon in Chinese. For example, a typical xiehouyu like “the hare’s tail—it cannot be too long” (兔子的尾巴—长不了) consists of two parts, the antecedent, “the hare’s tail”, and the consequent, “it cannot be too long”. A xiehouyu normally follows or precedes something said or some statement, which serves as the topic, and the saying is a kind of comment about the topic. For example, “他的好日子啊，兔子的尾巴，长不了。”(His good days are like the hare’s tail—they cannot be too long). So looked at this way, a typical xiehouyu might actually be a metaphor or metonymy in a larger context. The antecedent is a vehicle, and the consequent is the ground, which spells out the similarity or contiguity between the vehicle and the topic. What is meant to be the focus of a xiehouyu, or the ground, is always at the end, thus the name, xiehou, or “resting at the end”.

This study, based on a corpus of 1000 Chinese xiehouyu and PUCC (Peking University Chinese Corpus), finds that xiehouyu differs from other types of metaphor or metonymies in that the consequent of a xiehouyu is always spelled out when first used, or used when addressing someone who the speaker supposes is not familiar with the phrase. This gives a xiehouyu the advantage of selecting anything that might bear some similarity or contiguity relationship to the discourse topic to trigger or comment on the topic. But paradoxically, in actual usage, either the antecedent or the consequent may often be omitted, especially when the xiehouyu in case has been “entrenched” or is relatively familiar to the speaker or hearer. This indicates that either the antecedent or the consequent just serves as a trigger for a connection between the topic and vehicle or the ground. The study also finds that in many cases (about 30%), the selection of a vehicle of xiehouyu is random, which suggests that in using a phrase like this, the speaker is more interested in creating a special (often humorous or comic) discourse effect than using the metaphor or metonymy to reveal a certain aspect of the topic, thus the more interpersonal nature of certain types of metaphorical language.

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