

Playful Metaphors in Hakka Jokes and Pragmatic-Cultural Implications

Huei-ling Lai
National Chengchi University, Taiwan
hllai@nccu.edu.tw

Key words: playful metaphor, frames, cross-linguistic, cross-cultural, humor

Linguistic components of sounds, words or meanings are often manipulated to maximize the potential humorous effect of a joke. In particular, playful metaphors in jokes are created in an aim of language play that can contribute to the amusement of others and even to the solidarity among members in a community (cf. Ritchie 2013). Since interpretations of the amusing imagery triggered by playful metaphors can differ from language to language and from culture to culture, it is hence worthwhile to investigate deeper how playful metaphors are used by jokes in different languages. To this end, this study examines forty story-telling Hakka jokes that employ playful metaphors for the domain of SEX. The goal is twofold: to characterize the playful metaphors as well as the frames that these metaphors emerge, and to examine their pragmatic and cultural functions.

Two frames emerge from these stories: SEX ORGANS ARE COMPLEX OBJECTS/PLANTS and SEXUAL ACTIVITY IS COOKING/PLANTING. Playful creation of metaphors is observed with complex objects, plants or animals analogizing biological shapes or functions of male and female sex organs. Interestingly, they come in pairs: pig intestines to pans, mallets to gongs, white radishes to pits, or bamboo shoots to sticky rice cakes, with their shapes or properties metonymically profiled to bring about symbolic imagery of the organs and to insinuate sexual activities they can play on. Sexual activities are described by playful language that triggers the images of motion and fluidity such as rice transplanting, goose chasing, or food soaking. Further examination of the characters in the stories indicates that the protagonists are often daughter-in-law's or son-in-law's, and the scenarios are often about their clumsiness due to sexual inexperience or about their impropriety of having affairs.

From a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural perspective, the emergence of the two frames is not uncommon for SEX domain. However, the manipulation of playful metaphors together with projected imagery is both conceptually-supported and culturally-bounded. The utilization of certain playful metaphorical expressions to characterize sex organs and sexual activities evokes knowledge schemas from real-life Hakka folk experiences, including things they use for cooking, for planting or for raising animals. The selection of protagonists also reveals Hakka people's conception of family members from marriage—a highly moral-oriented value toward those affinity-in-laws. The findings that represent shared values of Hakka people carry pragmatic and social-cultural implications. Since sex is considered a socially tabooed topic in some cultures, talking about it directly is embarrassing and may damage listeners' face. Hence, as covert and humorous carriers, these sex-related Hakka jokes in a story-telling form not only serve as a narrative strategy to go around the uneasiness but also facilitate relational and social harmony as speakers can avoid committing themselves too strongly to what they are communicating (cf. Smith 2015; Dynel 2018).