

A Study of Transferred Epithet in Chinese from the Perspective of Prototype Theory

Gangni Chen^{1,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Xi'an, Shaanxi 710127, China

* Corresponding author. Email: chengn1979@126.com

ABSTRACT

The definition of Transferred Epithet (TE) given by Chen in 1930s is based on the traditional categorization theory, which is too absolute and excludes some linguistic expressions from it. Therefore this paper redefines it with the reference to prototype theory. By adopting a corpus-based approach, the research finds that TE, as a linguistic category, includes both prototype members and non-prototype members. Besides, there are mainly two types of non-prototype ones, the first is structured as "adverb + verb" in which the adverb is transferred word which originally functions as the epithet of objects or things before the transference; the second is realized by the structure of "adjective + noun" where the adjective is transferred from adverb with the latter serving as the environmental elements of verb event before the transference. This study proves the applicability of prototype theory on one hand, more importantly it deepens people's understanding of the nature of TE on the other hand.

Keywords: *Transferred Epithet (TE), prototype theory, transferred word*

I. INTRODUCTION

Transferred Epithet (TE) is one of rhetorical devices in Chinese language and it is commonly seen in literary works. Chen defined it as a figure of speech "in which when two impressions are associated together in the mind, an epithet that properly belongs to one is transferred to the other" [1] and he explained the common ones are those in which an epithet relating to human is moved to things. Since then this definition is regarded as authority in the field of academy and no one conducts his research without referring to this definition as the standard of deciding whether a linguistic element is TE or not. However, with the development of cognitive linguistics, especially prototype theory in cognitive linguistics, the deficiencies lying in it become more and more obvious. As prototype theory shows that all the categories combines both central members and members on the borders and not all the members share the same properties, so does TE as a linguistic category. But Chen's definition of TE, without doubt, is given with a reference to the traditional classification theory and thus too absolute which restricts TE only to some linguistic expressions.

This paper is aimed to redefine TE from the perspective of prototype theory. One point must be

clarified, that is, the redefining of TE does not mean we eradicate what is said by Chen. The following parts will show it is based on Chen's definition that we add something new to the definition to cover more instances under this heading. Since TE is derived from transference, we will try to recover the original form of each instance so that the nature of transference involved in TE can be revealed.

II. PROTOTYPE THEORY

Prototype theory is concerned with categorization. It has been said that human beings started to categorize things in the outside world into different groups from the earliest period. And it is because of categorization that the outside world becomes ordered in our eyes. Without such an ability to distinguish one thing from another, all the things would be mixed together and were just a total mass. But on what basis, some things are classified into one group and some things into other group? Take "bird" as an example, people normally consider those that have feathers or wings and have ability to fly as members of "bird". Or put it other way, two factors, feathers and flying, are often taken into consideration when it comes to whether an animal should be regarded as bird or not. In a broader sense, a member belongs to a certain group because it has all the features shared by the group. And this is the classical theory of categorization.

Later, the inadequacies of the classical theory of categorization are shown by an increasing body of empirical evidence in cognitive psychology. In his

*Fund: This paper, as a phrased result, is sponsored by

Humanities and Social Science Project of Department of Education in Shaanxi Province (with the grant number 18JK0741) and Northwest University (with the grant number 20XNFH024).

Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein (1978) notes that the various members of a category do not share a set of common properties, instead some members share some of the attributes, other members share other attributes [2]. And it is until the 1960s and 1970s that Berlin and Kay conducted systematic experiment on category [3]. They firstly experimented on color and found that people make the categorization of color by relying on the focal colors. In their subsequent experiments, they extend the tested categories to fruit, means of transportation and vegetable etc. The consequence of so many experiments is the proposal of "prototype theory". The theory holds that a category may include members which do not enjoy the same status and some member are good examples of the category, hence being seen as prototypes and some bad examples, hence as the peripheries. Prototypes are those who share more features with their members and peripheries are those who contain less features. The theory also maintains that there is a fuzzy boundary between different categories rather than a distinctive border. In a word, Prototype Theory (PT) is more objective and reasonable and can complement the inadequacies in the classical categorization theory. After its proposal, it has been applied to many fields and successfully solves some puzzles in them, such as past tense [4], noun [5] and etc. Therefore this paper is attempted to redefine TE from this new perspective so that people have a new understanding of it.

III. DETAILS REDEFINING OF TE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PROTOTYPE THEORY

According to the definition given By Chen, TE is an enclosed category with clear boundary and only those who possess the following three features can belong to it.

Feature one: the transferred word refers to epithet, namely, property before its transference.

Feature two: the epithet is transferred to other words from the one it usually belongs to.

Feature three: the word to which the epithet is transferred is a noun rather than other word classes.

In other words, these features are not only necessary but also sufficient defining features of TE and an instance exhibiting some of them cannot be seen as its member. However, prototype theory suggests that not all the instances of TE should possess the three features and some may have all the features and some may have just one or two of them. Based on such suggestion, we consider those characterized by all the features as prototype members of TE and those endowed with only some of the feature as non-prototype members of TE.

A. Prototype members in TE

With all the three features being considered, the typical instances of TE are nominal phrases which are composed of an adjective and a noun for epithet is grammatically realized by adjective. That is, they have a structure of "adjective +noun" with the sign "+" meaning "followed by" or indicating the sequence of the two grammatical elements. Semantically the relationship involved in the adjective and the noun is that of modification, namely the adjective is used to modify its following noun, hence the adjective is often termed modifier semantically. And such a relationship is a result of the transference in which the adjective is transferred from other places. Before the transference, the adjective actually collates with other words. The commonly seen examples of transferred epithet are as follows:

- (1) 幸福的泪水(happy tears)
- (2) 无忧无虑的童年(careless childhood)
- (3) 诚恳的求职信(a sincere letter of application)
- (4) 不眠之夜(sleepless night)
- (5) 快餐(fast food)
- (6) 喜事(happy event)
- (7) 老泪(纵横)(The old sheds tears)

All of the above instances are composed of an adjective and a noun. Of them the previous three ones have an auxiliary word "的" to indicate its preceding element and its following one are in a relationship of modification. It is true of the fourth example which also involves such a relationship. But this one differs from the other three ones in that this case employs the auxiliary word "之" rather than "的". It must be noted that both of them can be used to show the modification, but "之" is a Chinese character widely used in ancient Chinese and it is an indication of formal writing when used in modern Chinese. While in instance (5), instance (6) and instance (7), the relationship of modification involved in them is not explicitly expressed. Compared with the previous four ones, they are more concise and they are rarely seen as examples of transferred epithet as they are so frequently used in people's daily communication.

Although the former four instances and the latter three ones are different in the ways the modification relationship involved is expressed, all of them are the result of transference.

In the first two instances, the transferred adjectives are respectively "幸福"(happy), "无忧无虑"(careless), which are properties describing affects or emotions of human being. After transference, they are collocated with "泪水"(tears) and "童年"(childhood) to constitute a relationship of modification which is

indicated by the grammatical marker "的", the equivalent of which is "of" in English.

In instance (3) and (4), the transferred words "诚恳" (sincere) and "不眠" (sleepless) are related to a person's behavior. Once transference is made, they become modifiers of inanimate things, "信" (letter) and "夜" (night).

In instance (5), before transference, "快" (fast) is commonly used to describe the way or manner by which a verbal event or activity happens, such as "快走" (walk fast). With such a reference, the expression "快餐" may mean that "人们可以快吃的食物" (a food that people can eat fast).

In instance (6), the word "喜" refers to people's mental state, meaning "高兴" (happy). However when it is transferred to be collocated with "事", the new phrase "喜事", is formed which means "让人喜悦, 高兴的事" (an event which makes people happy).

In example (7), the transferred word "老" (old) is a description of people's age, and the noun "泪" is the drop of liquid coming from eyes. When the two linguistic elements form a new phrase, it actually means "老人流下的泪水" (tears shed by an old man).

With such a relatively detailed analysis of the above seven instance, we can find that the modifiers in them normally are collocated with other words or phrases, relating to properties. However, after the transference, they are moved from their normal collocations to modify objects or things which are realized grammatically by noun. As a consequence of transference, unusual and creative nominal phrases are created. In this sense, they all fully fulfill the three defining features of TE and hence can be regarded as the central members of TE.

B. Non-prototype members in TE

This study adopts corpus-based approach, a new means of investigating language that arrives at conclusion based on large quantities of data [6]. Therefore, research results based on this approach are more reliable. Given this strength, all our findings are generalized on the analysis of the data we collected. Up to now, we find that there are two types of non-prototype members of TE of which one is realized by the structure "adverb+verb" and the other is "adjective+noun". In the following sections, we will analyze them one by one.

1) *Type one*: The first type of non-prototype members in TE shares the structure of "adverb+verb" in which the transferred word refers to epithet and is realized by adjective before it is transferred, but it is changed into adverb to modify a verb by adding the

auxiliary "地" which has the very similar function as suffix "-ly" in English.

(8) 这时, 船走得更快, 不多时, 在台上显出人物来, 红红绿绿地动, 近台的河里一望乌黑的是看戏人家的船篷。(鲁迅《社戏》)

(The boat was moving faster now, and presently we could make out figures moving in a red and green way on the stage. The river close to the stage was black with the boat awnings of the spectators. (Village Opera by Lunxu))

This sentence is extracted from Luxun's novel Village Opera and it vividly describes the scene on the stage, as well as the scene on the river close to the stage. A careful examination shows that this sentence involves transference. As we know in most cases the expression "红红绿绿" relates to two kinds of colors, a property of object whose identification relies on human beings' sense of seeing. The typical collocations with "红" and "绿" include "红花绿叶", "绿树红墙", "红袄绿裤" and etc. That is, the two words usually function as the pre-modification of nouns. While in example (8) they serve as the modification of the verb "动", indicating the manner of the movement. The context suggests that before they are moved to modify the verb, they refer to the color of clothes of figures on the stage. So this case involves transference, meanwhile the transferred element is related to epithet in normal collocation. Since it is used to modify verb after its transference, the auxiliary "地" is added to make it become adverb. In Chinese there is no inflexion through which a word can be inverted into other word classes, for example, by adding prefix, a noun can become into a verb (e.g. force→enforce), and by adding suffix, a verb can be changed into a noun (e.g. act→action) [7]. In spite of lack of inflection, Chinese has its own means to achieve that effect and one of the means is to add auxiliary "地" and "的" with the former often indicating an adverb and the latter adjective. Now we present the original form of example (8) as the following one.

(8') 这时, 船走得更快, 不多时, 在台上显出人物来, 穿着红红绿绿的衣服在动, 近台的河里一望乌黑的是看戏人家的船篷。

(The boat was moving faster now, and presently we could make out figures, in red and in green, moving on the stage. The river close to the stage was black with the boat awnings of the spectators.)

A comparison of (8) and (8') shows that the sentence containing transferred epithet is more likely to attract reader's attention for its uncommonness and novelty. Apparently this transference does not match people's normal expectation that the verb "动" should be paired with adverb referring to speed, such as "快" or "慢". But if we take the situation into consideration, we may be fully convinced that such a collocation "红红绿绿地动" can no be better. As example (8) describes the

scene taking place at night, it is no wonder that it is the two striking colors of red and green that can be discerned in darkness. At the same time the children's boat could not approach the stage with too many boats around, it is impossible to see clearly in what way the figures moved on the stage from the distance. Therefore the adjective "红红绿绿" is transferred to describe the way of the figures' moving which can also highlight the property of the clothes of the figures it is originally used to modify.

Besides the above example, we find more examples with the structure of "adverb+verb". They are presented as follows:

(9) 但我却见过未倒的雷峰塔，破破烂烂地掩映于湖光山色之间，落山的太阳照着这些四近的地方，就是“雷峰夕照”，西湖十景之一。（鲁迅《论雷峰塔的倒掉》）

(But I had seen the standing Leifeng Pagoda, brokenly covered among the lake and mountain, with the setting sun shining on the nearby places, which is "Sunset Glow at Leifeng Pagoda", one of top ten attractions of West Lake. (On the Collapse of Leifeng Pagoda by Lunxun))

(10) 但是学校里的人们，虽是月薪十五六元的小职员，也没有一个不是乐天知命的，仗着逐渐打熬成功的钢筋铁骨，面黄肌瘦地从早办公一直到夜。（鲁迅《孤独者》）

(But the school staff, even those earning only fifteen or sixteen dollars a month, were easily contented. They all had iron constitutions steeled by hardship, and, although lean and haggard, would work from morning till night. (The Misanthrope by Lunxun))

(11) 夜色中，他穿著长衫的影子颇长地耸立着，在晚风的吹拂下，衣袂翩然。（琼瑶《几度夕阳红》）

(In the darkness, his shadow was standing slenderly with wind blowing his gown. (Many Enchanting Nights by Qiongyao))

2) *Type 2*: The second type of non-prototype members in TE is structured as "adjective+noun". In terms of structure it is the same as the prototype members. But as a matter of fact, they are different for in this type the adjective is actually adverb serving as the environment element of the sentence before its transference. Environment element is a semantic term rather than a grammatical term, it provides the detailed information about the event expressed by verb, "such as the location of an event in time or space, its manner, or its cause" [8]. Specifically there are nine types of circumstantial element, Extent, Location, Manner, Cause, Contingency, Accompaniment, Role, Matter and Angle¹. Up to now, the data we collected are mainly

concerned with Location and Manner. That is, in the data with the structure of "adjective+noun", the transferred words mainly express Manner and Location before the transference is made. Manner is a cover term which comprises three subcategories: Quality, Means and Comparison and they respectively answer the questions "what with", "how" and "what like".

The following three instances of TE are separately concerned with Quality, Means and Comparison.

(12) a. 所以，每次江仰止下了棋回来，江太太总要生一天的闷气。（琼瑶《窗外》）

(So every time when Mr. Jiang came back after playing chess with others, Mrs Jiang would be in a sulk for a day. (Outside the Window by Qiongyao))

b. 江雁容洗了手，回到自己的房间里，坐在书桌前闷闷地发呆。（同上）

(After washing her hands, Miss Jiang came back to her room. She then sat before her desk staring blankly in silent. (idem))

In Chinese, there is a very high frequency of the collocation "生闷气" and it has 500 occurrences in Peking University online Corpus, while "红红绿绿地动" has no occurrence at all, nor does the similar expressions with color words serving as the manner of moving. This high frequency makes it hard to notice the novelty of "生闷气", let alone to identify it as a transferred epithet for it has become a fixed phrase in Chinese. However a comparison of (12)a and (12)b will make it easy to find out the transference involved. As is shown in (12)b, "闷闷地" is originally employed to modify the verb "发呆", forming a very normal collocation "闷闷地发呆" in which "闷闷地", meaning silently, characterizes the verb event in terms of Quality. Thus in the nominal phrase "闷气", the pre-modification "闷" is transferred from serving as adverb and the original form of example (12)a may be recovered as the following one:

(12') a. 所以，每次江仰止下了棋回来，江太太总要闷闷地生一天气。

Example (13) is different from example (12)a in that the transferred word expresses Means originally. Means refers to the means whereby an event takes place; it is typically expressed by verb "用" and preposition "以", "靠" [9], "凭" and etc in Chinese, such as "他用刀子刺伤了她" (he wounded her with a knife), "凭着他的坚持不懈，他最终赢得了女孩的芳心" (he finally won the girl's heart with his perseverance) and etc. Since example (10) is derived from the transference, this explains the reason why the expression indicating Means is omitted.

¹ These terms are all capitalized to follow the principle in Systemic and Functional Linguistics which maintains that the

semantic terms should be capitalized to distinguish this school of linguistics from others.

(13) 在家门口，她碰到了住在隔壁的刘太太，一个标准的三姑六婆性的女人，每天最主要的工作是到每个人家里去串门，然后再搬弄口舌是非。(同上)

(At her door, she met Mrs. Liu, her next door neighbour. The latter is very curious about others' affairs and her main daily job is to visit others and tell their tales. (idem))

In this example, "是非" is often used individually without being modified, therefore the uncommonness of "口舌是非" can be immediately noticed. But where does the expression "口舌" in "口舌是非" come from? As two organs, "口" and "舌" are the means by which people talk. After a careful examination of its preceding sentence, we can be sure that "口舌" is originally to express the means of "搬弄", that is, with her "口舌", Mrs. Liu talked about people's tales. Thus the original sentence can be reworded as the following (13'). Similarly, the widely used expression "口舌之战" is also under the heading of TE.

(13') 在家门口，她碰到了住在隔壁的刘太太，一个标准的三姑六婆性的女人，每天最主要的工作是到每个人家里去串门，然后再用口舌搬弄是非。

After this rewording, "搬弄是非" obviously is a metaphor, for it actually means talking about other peoples' tales. One more word is needed, Chinese people rarely say "用口舌说是非", this is because when people talk, they depend on their mouth and tongue to do so which is universally known. Therefore the information "用口舌" in the expression "用口舌说是非" is redundant. The same is true of "用耳朵听", "用眼睛看". So far, we've analyzed instances of TE in which the transferred words originally function as Quality and Means. In addition, we've also found instance involving the transference of Comparison as is shown by the following example.

(14) 司机却非常大方，张开双手给了安娜一个很结实的熊抱[10]。

(However the driver was very outgoing and he opened his arms giving a strong bear hug to Anna.)

In this example, "熊抱" means hugging someone like a bear, that is before the transference, the way he hugged him is compared to that done by a bear. In this sense, originally "熊" serves as Comparison environment. Therefore its original wording can be presented as:

(14') 司机却非常大方，张开双手象熊一样给了安娜一个结实的拥抱。

Other examples which share the same derivation are "猫步", "樱桃小嘴", "虎背熊腰", "冬瓜脸" and etc. But people rarely see them as members of TE, because they have existed for very long time in Chinese language and become set phrases so that they are not as unique and novel as they were first created.

In the following example, the transferred word is originally used to express the time extent of event, one of aspects of Location.

她知道明远为什么不高兴，如果明远……她摔摔头，摔掉了一个将要形成的思想，却又无法自释的叹了口气。(琼瑶《几度夕阳红》)

(She knew why her husband was unhappy. "If he..." she shook her head to shake off a thought that was going to be shaped, but she sighed a long sigh without explanation. (Many Enchanting Nights by Qiongyao))

In Chinese, the verb "叹" is followed by the noun "气", thus forming a collocation of "叹气" which occurs very frequently in language use. If one wants to specify how long the verbal event lasts, he may say "长长地叹了一口气"(sighed for a long time) or "很快地叹了口气"(signed very quickly). Anyhow "长" is related to the time duration, giving an indefinite time extent. In example (15), "长" is moved to serve as the pre-modification of "气" and then a new expression "长气" is created which obviously is deviated from the normal collocation. Given the above analysis, we can recover the original form of example (15) as (15').

(15') 她知道明远为什么不高兴，如果明远……她摔摔头，摔掉了一个将要形成的思想，却又无法自释的长叹了口气。

From the above analysis of both prototype members and non-prototype members of TE, it can be seen that the identification of TE may involve several steps. Since TE is a new, creative linguistic expression deviated from normal collocation, the first step to identify it is to determine if an instance possesses such uncommonness or unusualness. As each word has some semantic requirements for the word that is collocated with it, the disobeying of such requirements normally leads to uncommonness or unusualness which could also be termed "semantic tension" [11]. But because some cases of transferred epithet have come into people's daily communication, such as "愉快的一天"(a happy day), "口舌之争"(verbal argument), "快嘴快舌"(quick tongue) and "卧铺"(sleeping car) etc, seldom can people realize their novelty and uncommonness [12]. In such situation, we must be very careful. After that try to figure out what is the transferred word. As the above analysis has shown that the transferred word can be an adverb in a collocation of "adverb + verb", or an adjective in the structure of "adjective + noun". Then examine the context in which the collocation occurs to make sure if there is a linguistic element that is modified by this transferred word before the transference is made. In other words, try to reword its original form. And this step is very necessary for it can demonstrate the difference between the original sentence and the transferred one.

IV. CONCLUSION

This research applies prototype theory to the study of Transferred Epithet. On one hand, it proves the applicability of this theory, on the other hand, it deepens people's understanding of TE by adopting a new perspective to see this rhetorical device. It finds that TE, as a linguistic category, includes both good examples and bad examples, namely prototype members and non-prototype members. The former can be represented by the structure of "adjective+noun", and the latter the structure of "adverb+verb". Additionally the study shows that some instances of TE have become set phrases in Chinese language and are widely used in people's daily life. As a result, their uniqueness and novelty are seldom noticed by its users. And this partly account for why such kind of instances are often excluded from the category of TE. Furthermore it demonstrates the process of how to identify TE when instances of TE are analyzed. The first step is to find out if the two linguistic units collocated with each other conform to their respective semantic requirement. The second step is to identify the transferred word. The last step is to recover the original sentence before the transference is made with a reference to a careful examination of the context in which the transferred word takes place.

References

- [1] Chen, Wangdao. 1976. *An Introduction to Rhetoric*. Shanghai: Education Press.
- [2] Wittgenstein, L. 1978. *Philosophical Investigations*. Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [3] Ungerer, E. & Schmid, H.J. 2001. *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [4] Taylor, R. John. 2001. *Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [5] Gan, Shi'an & Chen, Gangni. 2010. The Study of Noun from the Perspective of Prototype Theory. *Journal of Northwest University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)* 3: 160-162.
- [6] Biber, Douglas, Conrad Susan & Reppen Randi. 2000. *Corpus Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [7] Hu, Zhuanglin. 2011. *Linguistics: A Course Book*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- [8] Halliday, M.A.K. 2001. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [9] Peng, Xuanwei. 2010. *An Introduction to Language and Linguistics: Chinese Systemic and Functional Grammar*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- [10] Center for Chinese Linguistics PKU [DB/OL]. [Http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/search?q=%E7%86%8A%E6%8A%B1&start=0&num=50&index=FullIndex&outputFormat=HTML&encoding=UTF-8&maxLeftLength=30&maxRightLength=30&orderStyle=score&LastQuery=&dir=xiandai&scopestr=](http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/search?q=%E7%86%8A%E6%8A%B1&start=0&num=50&index=FullIndex&outputFormat=HTML&encoding=UTF-8&maxLeftLength=30&maxRightLength=30&orderStyle=score&LastQuery=&dir=xiandai&scopestr=)
- [11] Shu, Dingfang. 2000. *Studies in Metaphor*. Shanghai: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- [12] Chen, Gangni. The Attitudinal Functions of English Transferred Epithet, *Journal of Beijing University of Science and Technology*, No. 4, 2014.