

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A philosophical investigation of catchwords in Chinese

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Abstract: Catchwords spread rapidly because of their simple form and strong replicability. New catchwords enter our daily life every once in a while. Therefore, the study of catchwords is extremely urgent, because the study of language is the study of human life. This article takes the catchword ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter fake N) as an example to discuss its internal structure (which has been largely ignored in the existing research). The focus is on the study of the adjective ‘fake’ and its combined meaning with the noun after. Based on this, the meaning generation mechanism of the catchword is analyzed, including the relationship between necessity and probability, the evolution of meaning of the catchword, and the precipitation of construction meaning. Finally, the philosophical basis of communicative mechanism of the catchword is clarified. The main line of this study is to provide philosophical foundation for the popularity of catchwords.

Keywords: catchword; jia N; fake N; construction grammar; generation mechanism; communication mechanism

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of 2017, the sentence pattern ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter fake N)¹ was widespread in China’s network. For instance, college students have just finished taking the final exam, and the test paper is not easy, which is much higher than their expectation. Therefore, many questions cannot be done. At this moment, the students said (1) to show their dissatisfaction and complaint about the examination. One more example, when a patient has ear discomfort, yet what the doctor prescribes is medicine for nose, and the patient said (2) to show his confusion and bewilderment.

1. In Chinese, it is ‘假’ (jia). In this article, the counterpart adopted in English is ‘fake’ rather than ‘counterfeit’ or ‘false’. The reason is that in western literature, mainly ‘fake’ is investigated (e.g. Kamp, 1975, Partee, 2003; Cappelle et al., 2018), and the subtle nuance would not be considered here. Besides, ‘N’ means a noun, and in Chinese there is no article used before a noun. Thus, in English, the article is not presented, which would not bother our discussion.

(1) wo keneng yudao le jia shijuan.
1SG might encounter EXP fake test paper.
'I might encounter fake test paper.'

(2) wo keneng yudao le jia yisheng.
1SG might encounter EXP fake doctor.
'I might encounter fake doctor.'

Language reflects human life to a certain extent. Thus, the study of new linguistic facts plays a very important role in understanding human beings themselves. In view of this, many Chinese scholars have devoted themselves to the study of this sentence pattern. The phenomenon is mostly investigated from Construction Grammar (Lu, 2017), pragmatics (Chen, 2019), and mimic theory (Kuang et al., 2018). Besides, there are also researches based on traditional text and grammar (e.g. Deng, 2017; Wu, 2019). However, current researches on the catchword are not deep enough, which is shown in the following aspects: first, the existing literature has not analyzed the internal structure of this catchword, especially the combination of adjective 'fake' and the noun after; second, if this sentence pattern is a construction (as is evidenced in literature review), what does this construction mean (prototypically)? What is the mechanism of meaning generation and extension? Third, what is the philosophical basis for the spreading of the catchword?

These problems are the direct motive force for this article, which intends to draw wisdom from western philosophy of language, reflects on the meaning generation mechanism and communicative mechanism of the catchword, and tries to provide philosophical foundation for them.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 is a brief introduction. Section 2 focuses on the inner structure of the catchword, especially the problem caused by *jia* (fake). Section 3 discusses the meaning of the catchword, including its origin and evolution. Section 4 provides a new angle to describe the linguistic phenomenon. Section 5 concludes.

2. Inner structure of the catchword

Let's turn to the catchword. The sentence pattern is 'subject + modality verb + verb + adjective + noun'. The meaning of subject and modal verb is definite, while the compositional meaning of adjective and noun structure faces some problems. Traditionally, the attributive-head Chinese compound words composed of adjective and noun reflect the relationship of modification (Chao, 1968). For example, a 'red car' means a car that is red, and a 'round table' means a table that is round. Meantime, a 'red car' is still a car and a 'round table' is still a table. However, this is not the case with a 'fake gun'. Although the syntactic form of the 'fake gun' is the same as the above two examples, there are great differences in meaning. A 'fake gun' is not a gun (Kamp, 1975; Cappelle et al., 2018). It might be a toy gun with similar appearance, but it is definitely not a weapon capable of firing real bullets and killing people. Therefore, in order to clarify the differences between them, we need to further study the internal structure of the 'fake N' structure.

2.1. The failure of introspection in defining 'fake'

The question is not raised without any ground. Kamp (1975) firstly points out that ‘A fake gun is not a gun’, claiming the adjective ‘fake’ is not as common as ‘red’ in ‘red flower’. Later, Kamp and Partee (1995: 136–138) distinguish different types of adjectives from the semantic features of adjective and noun structure: the first type is *intersective adjective*, and the referents of compound words are the intersection of the referents of adjectives and that of nouns, such as ‘carnivorous mammal’; the second type is *non-intersective adjective*, also known as *subsective adjective*. The referents of compound words is a subset of that of nouns, such as ‘skillful surgeon’; the third type is *non-subsective adjective*. The referents of compound words are neither the intersection of that of adjectives and that of nouns, nor the subset of that of nouns. Non-subsective adjectives can also be further divided into *private adjectives*, that is, the referents of adjective and noun structure can never be an instance of the referents of the noun. They also point out that ‘fake’ and ‘counterfeit’ are private adjectives, but ‘alleged’ is not, because an ‘alleged gangster’ may or may not be a gangster. For some non-subsective adjectives, it is not entirely clear whether they are *private adjectives*, and ‘fake’ is actually controversial. However, there are two problems that lead to the ongoing debate. First, the author does not give an explanation for the division but only present some concrete examples. Second, the author does acknowledge that ‘fake’ is a controversial example² (our view will be presented below).

Partee (2003) divides the third type of adjectives into *plain non-subsective* and *privative adjectives*. The former includes ‘alleged’, ‘likely’ and ‘disputed’, while the latter includes ‘past’, ‘imaginary’ and such morphemes as ‘pre-’ and ‘non-’. It is worth noting that the author points out in this article that ‘fake’ is actually a subsective adjective, which is jointly defined by the ‘Non-vacuity principle’ and ‘The Head primacy principle’ (Kamp and Partee, 1995: 161).

This article argues that Partee (2003) has a problem with the presupposition of interpreting ‘fake’ as a subsective adjective. According to the ‘Non-vacuity principle’, “in any given context, try to interpret any predicate so that both its positive and negative extension are non-empty” (ibid.), then the positive extension and negative extension of ‘fake’ are both non-empty. However, the negative extension of ‘fake’ is easy to determine, i.e. to find out what is true, but what is the positive extension of ‘fake’? This goes back to the original point. What is ‘fake’?

In a nutshell, what Kamp and Partee did is based on their introspection, and they tried to set a rule, claiming that ‘fake’ is a privative adjective, without enough linguistic evidence though, while they did not further illustrate why the distinction should be made this way. Therefore, a shift of view of point may be needed.

2.2. A perspective from qualia structure

In this article, it is argued that the adjective ‘fake’ can be viewed from another angle. If Kamp and Partee approach the study with introspection (or a rule), then another possible idea is to focus on the noun after ‘fake’. A typical method is qualia structure (Pustejovsky, 1991, 1995).

Qualia structure is a method to express the lexical semantic structure of nouns, saying, to describe the referent of the noun, the constituents of the referent, the generation process of the referent, and the use or function of the referent. It mainly includes four levels of semantic knowledge, which is

2. The debate is ongoing, see Warren (1984), Jassem (2002), Farsi (2010) for further discussion.

depicted as four qualia roles:

- a) Constitutive: the relation between an object and its constituents, or proper parts, including material, weight, and parts and component elements;
- b) Formal: that which distinguishes the object within a larger domain, including orientation, magnitude, shape, dimensionality, color, and position;
- c) Telic: purpose and function of the object, including purpose that an agent has in performing an act, and built-in function or aim which specifies certain activities;
- d) Agentive: factors involved in the origin or “bring about” of an object, including creator, artifact, natural kind and causal chain (Pustejovsky, 1995: 85–86).

According to this view, there is a core set of lexical meanings in the lexicon, and its internal structure is richer than that of traditional theories, that is, it carries more information in the representation framework. For instance, there are two senses of ‘bake’: change of state sense (as in ‘he baked a potato’) and creative sense (as in ‘he baked a cake’). They are determined by its complements which ‘carry information which acts on the governing verb, essentially taking the verb as argument and shifting its event type’ (Pustejovsky, 1995: 123). In this way, the verb ‘bake’ itself is not polysemous.

It seems that the rule could be applied to the adjective ‘fake’. A ‘fake gun’ is not a gun that is made from metal material and that is always used as a weapon to shoot enemies in fight, while it may just look like a gun in appearance. In other words, what ‘fake’ negates is the agentive role and telic role of a gun, but adopts the formal role. However, it is still a question whether there is any effect on the constitutive role (Verspoor, 1997).

On the one hand, it is likely that the ‘fake gun’ is made from the metal material, yet no bullet could be shot from the inside owing to the erosion of the trajectory; on the other hand, the ‘fake gun’ might be a toy gun, i.e. a toy which is made from plastic material. Therefore, whether the constitutive role is asserted or not, it is not clear before an access to rich contextual information.

It should be noted that the adjective ‘fake’ does not always perform like this, and it may also negate or assert other roles³. For instance, ‘fake flower’ is not flower. What ‘fake’ negated is the agentive role, constitutive role and telic role of ‘flower’, only making use of the formal role. Specifically, there is no possibility for ‘fake flower’ to be flower, and ‘fake flower’ is mostly made from plastic material for decoration even though there is not any smell of flavor.

In section 2.1, it is suggested that there is controversy on the adjective ‘fake’, and the problem does not disappear in qualia structure. However, the disagreement could be resolved by appealing to qualia structure of the noun after the adjective ‘fake’. In reverse, if the debate is gone, this is the real problem. The reason behind the disagreement lies in different properties of the noun.

In short, Pustejovsky’s qualia structure is much more helpful than Kamp and Partee’s plan, and the former is justified with authentic linguistic facts. Meantime, the various explanation of ‘fake N’

3. There are examples in Chinese that cannot be explained by qualia structure, like ‘jia yao’ (fake medicine). It is ‘jia’ (fake) because it is not registered in China Food and Drug Administration. However, this kind of medicine preserves the four qualia roles well. This challenge would not be addressed in this article, and the qualia structure is still a useful tool for current purpose.

structure derives from ‘N’ rather than from ‘fake’, which is a move against tradition.

3. Meaning generation mechanism of the catchword

Language is not an entirely closed and autonomous system. It is always in evolution. The same is true of catchwords. In order to find out where it is going, we need to know where it is coming from. This article will discuss the meaning generation mechanism of the sentence pattern, ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter fake N), from three aspects and try to make a reasonable explanation for it. Specifically, first of all, we will discuss why modality verb is involved; secondly, we will talk about the origin and evolution of the meaning of this sentence pattern. Finally, it is proved that this sentence pattern is indeed a construction.

3.1. Judgement of ‘fake’

In the last section, we have noticed the source of possible interpretation of ‘fake’ in different linguistic context. Here, we would like to show a comparison which is nearly ignored by almost all researchers who are involved in the catchword at issue, where the modal verb is a focus.

As a pioneer of anti-realism, Dummett attacked Davidson’s realism. Davidson believes that when we understand language, the evidence that enables us to understand it is self-evident and can be found in the world, regardless of whether people have the ability to know or grasp it. On the contrary, Dummett (1999: 309–311) associates the meaning of a sentence with its assertability condition, and understanding a statement means knowing what can be used as evidence to support or oppose that sentence. In other words, a sentence is meaningful if and only if we have gained the evidence to judge whether it is true or not, and a statement is true because of the existence of such evidence. The underlying reason here is that the concept of truth cannot be grasped in a way beyond evidence.

When a speaker says (3), what he wants to express is totally different from (4). In logical expression, the former is $\diamond E(I, F)$, and the latter is $\Box E(I, F)$, where ‘E’ means ‘encounter’, ‘I’ means ‘I’ and ‘F’ means ‘fake test paper’. Probability and necessity is distinguished⁴.

(3) wo keneng yudao le jia shijuan.

1SG might encounter EXP fake test paper.

‘I might encounter fake test paper.’

(4) wo yudao le jia shijuan.

1SG encounter EXP fake test paper.

‘I encounter fake test paper.’

Further, we have reason to believe that the speaker does not have enough evidence to support the condition that renders the sentence (4) true. To say the least, although the speaker does not have exact evidence to prove the authenticity of the test paper, he still regards the event of ‘authenticity

4. \diamond means ‘probably’, and \Box means ‘necessarily’. They are logical symbols.

of the test paper' as the central meaning conveyed by his words, and all he can do is report his true judgment completely. In other words, he cannot make a judgment of necessity, but only a judgment of probability. This article holds that this is the embodiment of the rational people's appeal to the function of expressing meaning by language in a community. In the face of the complicated world, the powerlessness of language is also highlighted (e.g. Quine, 1951; Wittgenstein, 1953; Burke, 1966). However, this requires us to use language more carefully and creatively. Therefore, the sentence (3) completes the speaker's thoughts.

The comparison is not without reason. Medin and Shoben (1998) has suggested that the concept of a word is composed of centrality and diagnosticity. The basis of this division lies in the fact that two individuals have different degrees of understanding of the same object, and they are in an intermediate state from diagnosticity to centrality. According to the principle of economy (Zipf, 1949), those who can be judged simply by diagnostic features need not resort to central features. Unless two individuals differ in their judgment of the same object by using diagnostic features, central features will come into use. Most ordinary people only have diagnostic features, which is enough to for them to communicate successfully in daily life, while only professional researchers may be equipped with central features.

The division of a concept into centrality and diagnosticity indeed shows a 'division of linguistic labor' (Putnam, 1975). For example, ordinary people can judge what category an animal belongs to according to its shape, color, size and other characteristics, and zoologists' judgment is based on the animal's DNA, biological lineage and so on. Then, when ordinary people dispute over a certain judgment, they can resort to zoologists for help. What's more, a tiger has lost one leg and only three legs are left after being wounded by hunters, so ordinary people may give different answers to the following question: Is this animal a tiger? Although this animal has black and yellow fur, and its shape looks like a tiger, it is possible for differences to arise even if one leg is missing, because the standard of appearance which ordinary people resort to (i.e., a tiger has four legs) has been challenged.

The reason why ordinary people have disputes is that the criteria they use to make judgment (tiger's diagnostic features) are not enough to draw definite and accurate conclusions, so it is necessary to seek help from experts. The criteria that experts have (tiger's central features) are relatively more convincing.

Besides, the division of a concept into centrality and diagnosticity also promote the efficiency of human communication. In fact, the division is not restricted to linguistic communication, but also plays a role in physics. Newton's theorem can explain most of the problems in daily life, including non-discrete factors such as time and place. Under the conditions of low speed and weak gravity, classical mechanics is quite accurate. As it happens, the environment in which we live is just low-speed and weak-gravity. Therefore, classical mechanics can solve 99.9% of the problems of 99.9% of our people. In daily life, Newtonian mechanics is very scientific, which is enough to explain most phenomena in the world. Running trains, flying planes and rushing seas are all covered by the basic assumptions of Newtonian mechanics.

Although Einstein's theory of relativity refutes Newton's classical mechanics, it is a more professional career. In other words, Newton's theorem can solve 99.9% of the problems, while Einstein's theory of relativity is born to solve the remaining 0.1%. Ordinary people only need to

know Newton's theorem, while the theory of relativity could be left to physicists.

Another example is about the height. When one is asked about his height, the number need not to be accurate to nanometer. A relatively inaccurate number like 170cm would suffice. What's more important is the application in description of a wanted man on the poster. The police should not specify the height into 170.25cm, which would lead to confusion and bewilderment in the mass. An appropriate description may be 'around 170cm' (Qian, 2015).

Thus, through an analysis of 'might', it is found that the judgment of 'fake' is not easy at all. Perhaps one is sure about the result, or he is not that sure. The difference renders us various interpretation of 'fake', which would be discussed next.

3.2. The origin and evolution of meaning of the catchword

As to 'wo keneng yudao le jia N' (I might encounter fake N) structure, there are two possible sources:

First, from January 14, 2017, a Chinese test paper from New York Middle School in the United States has been wildly circulated on the Internet⁵. The test paper is not easy, which is much higher than the expectation of native Chinese. Therefore, many questions cannot be finished and they are so surprised that Chinese teachers in the United States should give students such examination papers, rendering countless netizens in china exclaim sentence (5);

Second, at the end of 2016, a piece of news caught the attention of Chinese netizens: illegal businesses in Russia turned personal washing products containing alcohol into fake alcohol and sold them, resulting in poisoning and even death of many people⁶. As a result, the sentence (6) circulated on Weibo (a Chinese version of Facebook).

(5) wo keneng yudao le jia zhongwen.

1SG might encounter EXP fake Chinese.

'I might encounter fake Chinese.'

(6) wo keneng yudao le jia jiu.

1SG might encounter EXP fake alcohol.

'I might encounter fake alcohol.'

For the first source, the speaker expressed his evaluation of his native language level with the sentence (5). Generally, Chinese proficiency of a native Chinese speaker is much better than that of a foreign speaker (e.g. British and American), so the Chinese test paper of foreign speakers should be a piece of cake in the eyes of a native Chinese speaker. However, native Chinese speakers should find that they could not answer the Chinese test paper of New York Middle School well, which makes them feel a little ashamed. Therefore, they coined the sentence. It should be noted that native Chinese speakers are basically experts in Chinese, so their uttering of 'jia zhongwen' (fake Chinese) is based on their language ability, and the judgment has certain objective verifiability. In other

5. <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1556762220734698&wfr=spider&for=pc>

6. <http://world.people.com.cn/n1/2016/1223/c1002-28971730.html>

words, Chinese that native Chinese speakers have learned lags behind that of foreign learners of Chinese. Thus, the sentence expresses self-mockery and helplessness of one's own Chinese level.

For the second source, 'jia jiu' (fake alcohol) here is opposite to 'zhen jiu' (authentic alcohol). The former violates the production standard of drinking alcohol and arbitrarily changes its composition ratio, which is different from the authentic alcohol. This also involves the division of linguistic labor in language (Putnam, 1975). Most people only learn names of the linguistic expression of an object in a community, but they do not learn the way to judge whether the referents of that expression are correct or not. However, the division of labor and cooperation between speakers enable them to use words correctly. Since the Russian consumer is not an alcohol expert, he could only make a judgment which he thinks is correct, based on his physiological reaction (poisoning), so the speaker said (6). It should be pointed out that 'fake' here is the judgment made by the speaker based on his own experience, because drinking authentic alcohol does not cause poisoning. The judgment of Russian consumers also has certain objective verifiability.

No matter what the source is, China's college students combined it with the final exam they have just finished and forged the sentence (3), i.e., 'wo keneng yudao le jia shijuan' (I might encounter fake test paper). As to the authenticity or fakement of the alcohol, we can resort to the standards of the alcohol industry, while the truth and falsity of test paper itself is not a question at all, because there is no standard to judge, even we cannot imagine such a standard. Then, the meaning expressed by students using (3) is quite different from the meaning expressed by (6). Therefore, what is fake test paper? What constitutes the fake-ness of the test paper?

This article holds that the 'fake' here has broken away from its literal meaning and has become a pragmatic meaning. According to qualia structure (Pustejovsky, 1995), 'fake test paper' is not fake at all. The four roles are well preserved, which exhibits a different 'fake-ness' that we regard it as *pragmatic, subjective evaluation*.

Specifically, as a participant in the final exam, students have the obligation to complete the test paper, and what they need to do is to finish the questions on the test paper. The objective factors such as the difficulty of the test paper and the question type setting are beyond their control. When students are confronted with problems that do not conform to what they have prepared, or when the difficulty of the problems falls short of their expectations, students express their subjective evaluation with 'fake'. They knew that the test paper was a real one, but they did not meet the test paper that they expected, so they said they encountered 'fake test paper'. Moreover, what is important is that for such students, different people have different standards of 'fake', after all, individual expectations vary⁷. In this way, in a specific context, the word 'fake' completes the transition from semantic (literal) meaning to pragmatic meaning.

At the same time, pragmatic meaning has the potential to replace its semantic meaning. In fact, fact judgment (objective) is no longer what language users care about, and they turn their energy to value judgment (subjective). This change can also be witnessed from the sentence (7).

(7) wo keneng yudao le jia mama.

1SG might encounter EXP fake mother.

7. This idea is now presented as semantic relativism. For further discussion, see Predelli (2005) and MacFarlane (2007).

‘I might encounter fake mother.’

Mother and child are genetically homologous individuals in biology, and ‘fake mother’ literally refers to individuals with different genes, but the speaker uses this sentence to describe his mother, so ‘fake mother’ here actually refers to the genetically real mother, and the use of ‘fake’ is to disagree with some of the mother’s characteristics. The literal meaning of the word ‘fake’ has fallen off and has become the pragmatic meaning of the speaker. We can imagine that someone else’s mother cooks delicious food for their children every day, while his mother’s food is hard to swallow, so he said that sentence to actually complain with the cooking skills of his mother, and gently express his unhappiness and dissatisfaction in the speaker’s heart. Of course, this sentence can also be used to satirize another characteristics of the mother, which is not repeated here.

In summary, ‘fake test paper’ is different from ‘fake alcohol’, and there is a difference between semantic (literal) meaning and pragmatic meaning. And the pragmatic meaning is preferred and adopted for novel use, which in turn makes the sentence pattern a very productive schema that seems to be a construction. This is the topic of the next part.

3.3. The crystallization of construction meaning

We have talked about that the word ‘fake’ has gradually lost its semantic meaning in (3), i.e., ‘wo keneng yudao le jia shijuan’ (I might encounter fake test paper), and pragmatic meaning is preferred as illustrated in ‘fake mother’. It is not hard to find out more examples, such as ‘fake doctor’, ‘fake teacher’ and so on.

After a mass use, the meaning of the sentence ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter false N) has exceeded the sum of the meanings of its constituent elements, i.e. its meaning cannot be completely predicted from the meaning of its constituent elements. Goldberg (1995: 4) claims that “C is a CONSTRUCTION iff C is a formal-meaning pair $\langle F_i, S_i \rangle$ such that some aspect of F_i or some aspect of S_i is not strictly predictable from C’s component parts or from other previously established constructions”. Therefore, we can regard the sentence pattern, ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter false N), as a construction.

Thus, what construction meaning does this construction express? According to our discussion above, the construction actually expresses the speaker’s disagreement with N (noun), which does not conform to the speaker’s expectation, thus revealing the speaker’s regret and self-mockery, confusion and bewilderment, unhappiness and dissatisfaction and another subjective evaluation.

It should be noted that the construction could express more than one meaning. Specifically, the prototype meaning of this construction expression is the speaker’s self-mockery, revealing his dissatisfaction with N. And the fake-ness of N in this case is no longer the truth-conditional meaning, that is, the truth of N is not an objective fact, but the speaker expresses his dissatisfaction with N by using the word ‘fake’. Further, the compositional meaning of the adjective fake and the noun structure underdetermines the meaning of the whole sentence pattern, which is the credit of construction coercion on the one hand (Wang, 2009, 2013), and an instance of linguistic underdeterminacy on the other (Carston, 2002; Picazo Jaque, 2019).

Thus, the prototype meaning of the construction is pragmatic rather than semantic, which has become a kind of social default (Jacszolt, 2005, 2016), or general communicative norms (Huang,

2012: 37). However, this understanding is a ‘direct access view’ (Gibbs, 2002) in the Chinese context, without first calculating the literal meaning.

So, as to the construction, can it express semantic meaning? The answer is yes. Let’s go back to the sentence (6), i.e., ‘wo keneng yudao le jia jiu’ (I might encounter fake alcohol). The Russian consumer use this sentence to precisely express the meaning of ‘the alcohol is highly likely to be fake’. This is truth-conditional and can be verified by objective situation. At that time, if we regard (6) as a means of expressing the speaker’s self-mockery, this may not be the case. Moreover, for scientific researchers (especially in hard science), the construction ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter false N) is also likely to express semantic meaning-incomplete judgment on certain research results, rather than the prototype meaning of the construction.

To sum up, the construction can express both pragmatic meaning as a prototype and semantic meaning. To determine which one it expresses depends on the objective context and the identity of the speaker.

4. The communication mechanism of the catchword

One of the great advantages of taking the sentence pattern ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter false N) as a construction is that its appearance indicates its own intrinsic construction meaning. Although N has not been specified yet, the reader can probably guess its meaning. In this way, the construction retains its original meaning, i.e. high fidelity in transmission. Meantime, such language fragments also conform to the principle of economy in linguistics (Zipf, 1949), because people are accustomed to using simple ellipsis to express their thoughts in communication, which is actually an ‘ostensive-inferential process’ (Sperber and Wilson, 1986). On this basis, people keep filling new words into the framework, which in turn enhances the vitality of the framework.

This article agrees with the aforementioned explanation of communication, but this is not enough. The nature and performance of any kind of research object are various, and the methods close to it are also diverse. Owing to this, each theoretical thinking and method construction only reflects one aspect. Therefore, we can study the communication mechanism of the catchword from another aspects. This article intends to draw wisdom from later Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language and try to provide philosophical support.

4.1. A change of focus in early and later Wittgenstein

As a representative of the Artificial Language School, early Wittgenstein used logical methods to reveal the structure of sentences in the early period, and then clarified meanings and concepts, trying to understand the world through language. Picture theory is his main contribution (Wittgenstein, 2001). “For philosophical problems arise when language goes on holiday” (Wittgenstein, 1953: §38). It is not too much to say that this famous saying is the core of his early thoughts. Philosophical problems stem from the split reflection between language and the world. In short, when the tools used for interpersonal communication, expressing thoughts, proposing assumptions and other behaviors are excluded from the relevant context and abstracted as the object of investigation, the question arises: why can linguistic expression express meaning and what is the essence of linguistic meaning?

However, Wittgenstein himself abandoned the research approach of this essentialist tendency. Ordinary language philosophy does not deny the fuzziness and ambiguity of ordinary language, but believes that there is no need to resort to artificial language, and ordinary language can answer these questions. It is just like rough ground which has more friction than painted ground, so it is more suitable for walking. “We want to walk: so we need friction. Back to the rough ground” (Wittgenstein, 1953: §107). On this basis, Wittgenstein put forward the conceptions of ‘language game’ and ‘form of life’ in the later period, which inspired the author to discuss the mechanism of catchword communication.

4.2. Catchword and language game

Wittgenstein’s ‘language game’ is actually a whole composed of language and activity. However, Wittgenstein did not give a clear definition of what a ‘language game’ is, but only explained it through a series of examples. This is consistent with his anti-essentialist position. For example, the bricklayer said ‘slab’ to the apprentice. The apprentice did not point his finger at the slab and showed it to the master. However, it was appropriate to pass the slab to the bricklayer. This is a language game.

Similarly, the use of catchword is also a language game. When the speaker utters a catchword, the catchword itself serves as the language, while the intention behind the use is the speaker’s activity. “Every utterance is ultimately the product of an agent acting for a reason” (Lepore and Stone, 2015: 230). Of course, this special language game takes place in specific form of life.

Cavell (1996) divides form of life into two dimensions: vertical and horizontal. The former is a shared biological attribute in language communication, such as visual characteristics, while the latter is a social and historical background, which is relatively stable but constantly changing. Xu (2012) suggests that there are two main reasons for the spread of catchwords: the specificity of the language unit in content reflects people’s social mentality on the one hand, and the specificity of the language unit in form reflects people’s language mentality on the other hand.

Furthermore, this article holds that these two reasons actually correspond to the horizontal form of life and the vertical form of life. Social mentality highlights the game part of ‘language game’, while language mentality highlights the language part of ‘language game’. The two parts complement each other and jointly construct a complete speech act. Thus, language itself is a whole set of form of life or form of game including form of thought (Qian, 2001).

People use catchwords (as ‘language games’) to do things: to express self-mockery, to show off, to admire, or to complain. Catchwords reflect the social mentality and language mentality in a specific period of time, both of which are jointed together as ‘language games’. To accept and use catchwords is to accept the ‘being’ of the catchword, saying, the world hidden behind the catchword. After all, people always own the world through language (Li, 2006: 30). It is in ‘language game’ that catchwords are spread.

5. Conclusion

In daily life, catchwords are here and there, but we don’t know them well enough. In this article, through the study of the sentence pattern ‘wo keneng yudao le jia N’ (I might encounter false N), the

following findings are made:

(1) The compositional meaning of the adjective ‘fake’ and the noun after can be explained from the perspective of qualia structure, thus avoiding setting ‘fake’ as a polysemous word, and its different semantic realizations are indeed affected by the following noun;

(2) The modality word ‘keneng’ (might) in the sentence pattern usually reflects the fact that the evidence held by the speaker is not sufficient to make a definite judgment, which can be explained by the division of linguistic labor;

(3) This sentence pattern is indeed a construction. Its prototype meaning is the speaker’s dissatisfaction, unhappiness, spitting or self-mockery with a certain object. The extended meaning may be semantic, and the construction has a coercion effect on N, that is, no matter what N is, as long as it enters this construction, its primary meaning is prototype meaning;

(4) The spread of catchwords resonates with later Wittgenstein’s conception of ‘language game’. Language itself includes form of life and form of game. People have to find themselves through and in language.

Meantime, it should be noted that the study on *jia* (fake) in the paper is central to qualia structure, especially the four norms. However, there are linguistic facts that are controversial. For instance, a fake gun might also preserve the purpose of an authentic gun to terrify a bank clerk in bank robbery. Thus, a much more detailed study on qualia structure is needed in further study.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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