The Differences between Zeugma and Syllepsis

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Abstract: The effective use of zeugma (originated from Greek) and syllepsis can do more than provide deep insights into the working of humor; it also can express the rich language significance. But the rhetorical characteristic of English zeugma is totally different from syllepsis, how to clarify the difference between them is the foundation of appreciation, which will enhance English learners’ appreciation ability and language performance. This paper gives a brief analysis of the differences between zeugma and syllepsis.

Key words: figure of speech; zeugma; syllepsis

1. Introduction

According to the Modern English Language Dictionary (America), “Rhetoric is an art or science of communication in words”. In general, it is a form of expression. That is, a figure is a piece of language (typically more than a single word) that has an unusual arrangement; its purpose is to change the shape of language, aiming at creating more expressive and humorous language, which can be easily understood. Zeugma and Syllepsis involve artful changes in the actual structure of language.

Most modern linguists agree that zeugma and syllepsis are two distinct constructions arising from two distinct cognitive operations, although they are alike in that they both involve an explicit source expression (that which is mentioned), which suggests an implicit target (intended item of communication) (Warren, Beatrice, 1999). The difference between figures of zeugma and syllepsis is slight, and rhetoricians have struggled for millennia to categorize them effectively.

Syllepsis preserves the literal meaning of the words but arranges them artfully; zeugma transforms the actual meaning or the initial of the word or phrase. Hence, zeugma uses a word or phrase to mean something other than its literal meaning. Technically speaking, both of them are figure of speech.

The emphasis of this study is on the understanding of how and why rhetoric devices work. Human beings study rhetoric in order to understand how such texts create meaning, how knowledge is constructed, how we intervene into the making of knowledge, and how we use knowledge to take action. Studying rhetoric, then, helps us to understand how language works and how we use language to work for us. Generally speaking, rhetorical analysis is using the principles of rhetoric to make sense of how and why a given text works the way it does, to make sense of how and why it creates meaning.

And zeugma and syllepsis can do more than create meaning, which can also provide cognitive insights into the working of expressing ideas concisely and powerfully (zeugma) while, at the same time, permitting and even encouraging us to look for humorous, or even zany ways in which the same term can be used (syllepsis).
2. Origination and Definition

Zeugma, a figure of speech, the origin of which is the Greek “zeugnunai” (a joining, uniting, yoking), in which words are collocated with two or more other words such that its values are transferred apparently inappropriately but with more powerful expressive effect. To be specific, zeugma is “the use of a single word—usually a verb—to refer to two (or more) other words—usually nouns—when the first word is only literally suited to one of the other words. The meaning of zeugma has been broadened to include the use of one verb to refer to two or more nouns, where the meaning of the verb changes when used with the different nouns. Usually, the first use is figurative and the second use is literal” (ZHANG Chang-lan, 1998).

Judging from the definition, it is clearly stated that only one of the collocations is permitted, whereas the other is not properly collocated by grammar, but present a poetic figure, which seems to be unreasonable. But it is the unreasonableness that reaches an unexpected effect. One famous example is that “wage war and peace” (ZHANG Chang-lan, 1998). This sentence is using zeugma because to “wage war” involves a different sense of “wage” than does to “peace”. In this sentence, the word “wage” is made to modify or to govern two or more words (“war” and “peace”) in the same sentence, either properly applying in sense to only one of them (war), when it applies to them properly both by grammar and syntax but in different sense, it is called syllepsis.

3. Logical Mechanism of Zeugma

Zeugma is a wonderfully versatile conceptual tool, adept at generating different senses. By definition, zeugma in English means that “a word is used to modify or govern two or more words although its use is grammatically or logically correct with only one”(WEN Jun, 1992). There are more versions of this category of usage, as the following examples to illustrate:

(1) One verb + two (or more) objects
   eg: Kill the boy and the luggage(ZHANG Chang-lan, 1998).

   There is a striking semantic difference inherent in this sentence, which is using the poetic figure zeugma because to “kill the boy” involves a different sense of “kill” than does to “kill the luggage”. Its use makes the sentence terse, tightly knit, vivid, humorous, novel and original, and has special expressivity. Generally speaking, only “kill” and “the boy” makes perfect match, whereas “the luggage” can be modified by other verbs, such as “destroy”, “tear”, which changes the verb’s initial meaning.

(2) Prep + two (or more) objects
   eg: …went straight home, in a flood of tears and a sedan chair.

   “In a sedan” is used in a literal sense; in a flood of tears is a figurative expression, means “grievingly”. (ZHANG Chang-lan, 1998).

(3) Two subjects + one verb
   eg: Ten minutes later, the coffee and Commander Dana of Naval Intelligence arrived simultaneously. (DU Bai-shun, 2005)

   (Commander Dana arrived himself, but the coffee was really brought in at the same time.)

(4) Adjective+ two (or more) nouns (or Noun phrases)
   eg: She is having a blue coat and a heart today. “Blue coat” is rather clear for its literal meaning, and there is “blue heart”, its meaning derives from “the blues”, which has the meaning of “depressed” or “gloomy”. The collocation of one adjective with two or more nouns creates two peculiar meanings in the same sentence.
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The most common characteristics are presented on the above, although some other versions of this figure may exist. Usually, the putting together of words or phrases with different senses in this way results in a humorous and more expressive effect, but it is not always the same. For each instance of its usage must be considered in relation to its context to see what effect the writer is really aiming at.

4. Logical Mechanism and Introduction to Syllepsis

Comparing to zeugma, syllepsis always creates two connotations, but the key word is properly applied to or agreeing with both of them in grammar or syntax. According to The Dictionary of Figurative Language, syllepsis is “The use of any part of speech comparably related to two other words or phrases, correctly with respect to each taken separately, as to both syntax and meaning, but in different ways, so as to produce a witty effect”. (WEN Jun, 1992)

For example: The newly elected chairman of the committee took the oath and his seat (ZHANG Chang-lan, 1998).

Here both “the oath” and “his seat” are governed by the same verb “took”, which creates perfect figurative meanings.

5. Some Important Differences Between Zeugma and Syllepsis

5.1 Emphasis differences
Zeugma enables a concise or even poetic statement of a situation (especially if the verb is at the end). Syllepsis emphasizes incongruity between meanings of a verb or different fields of meaning of nouns (destination vs. duration). This is a point made very clear by ZHANG Chang-lan (1998).

5.2 Functional differences
Zeugma serves as a rhetorical device or as a device to modify or to govern two or more words in the same sentence, either properly applying in sense to only one of them, or applying to them in different senses. The same is true of syllepsis, but in contrast to zeugma, it needs not have either of these functions, and the key words can be repeated but served in different meaning in the same sentence.

5.3 Constructional aspect
Zeugma is basically a syntagmatic construction, more precisely one of the combinations in which the collocation is implicit by grammar, whereas syllepsis basically a property-transferring semantic operation.

5.4 Conditions on meaning transfer and psychology
Meaning transfer is possible when there is a clear correspondence between the properties of one thing and the properties of another, in which case the name of the first property can be used to refer to the second. Meaning transfer is rather conventional and frequently occurred. Sometimes there is a direct functional relation between two sets of properties, as in cases of zeugma, which has marked contrast to syllepsis.

5.5 Effectiveness differences
In syllepsis, both expressions would be perfectly correct and unimpressive if in separate sentences. For example:
(a) She went home in a flood of tears.
(b) She went home in a sedan chair.
These two sentences are both perfectly normal. What makes the syllepsis is joining them so that “went home
in” has to change senses radically within the same sentence. She went home in a flood of tears and a sedan chair requires “a flood of tears” to be taken figuratively and “a sedan chair” to be taken literally. “In” means to be physically located within, and that is the sense it has with “a sedan chair”. But also it can refer to circumstances on a more abstract level, and that is what it means with “a flood of tears”.

The effect of syllepsis is usually humorous. The sudden change of sense seems to appeal to whatever sense appreciates double meanings such as puns. Syllepsis is appropriate to humor and satire and to any writing in a light, ironic tone.

Zeugma generally will be taken as an error, although it is sometimes used as a figure in poetry. In the first example (“What? Killed the boys and the luggage?”), the raiders have killed the bearers and looted the luggage. They did not kill the luggage. In the second (“with weeping eyes and hearts”), we suppose what is meant is “with weeping eyes and saddened hearts”. The hearts do not weep.

5.6 Intentional or not intentional

In some cases it will not be clear whether zeugma is intentional or not. For example: “She wore bargain-basement clothes and diamonds”. Does this imply that there is such a thing as bargain-basement diamonds? Or did she wear diamonds from Tiffany’s with bargain-basement gowns? So we need to be alert to zeugma as a possible error. A careful writer would recognize the zeugma, decide which meaning he or she wanted, and then express the idea in a new, unambiguous sentence.

When used intentionally, as in the response to raiders’ attack, zeugma indicates the speaker is shocked almost to the point of incoherence. Likewise, when zeugma occurs in poetry it seems to imply some emotion so powerful as to transcend syntax. This seems to be the intention of “with weeping eyes and hearts”.

6. Concluding Discussion

Both of zeugma and syllepsis make sentences potentially very suggestive and powerful, yet economic meaning-creating devices. Occasionally, if done well, they can illustrate a profound truth, and can encourage us to think through the full linguistics for structural or semantic field of words, thus enriching our understanding of language, and making us alert to how to use words or phrases properly, how to use a figure to serve our appreciation for English works, and how to improve our writing skills.

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