

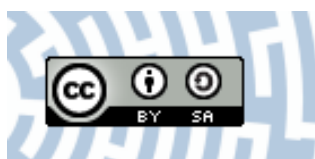


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**Title:** The functions of punning utterances in English and Chinese: a cross-cultural perspective

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## The functions of punning utterances in English and Chinese: a cross-cultural perspective

### 1. Introduction

Some time ago, while surfing the net, I came across a blog entry commenting on a Chinese text containing two puns. There would be nothing special about it except that the text in question was part of a safety notice cautioning users of electric appliances to replace a burnt out fuse instead of trying to fix it. Written in big red characters above a picture of an electric switch and a faulty fuse, the message in (1), repeating the word *huàn*, first as a verb meaning ‘replace’, then as a noun meaning ‘hazard’, alerted the reader to the dangers of not abiding by the proper safety measures.

- (1) *Nǐ shì yào huàn (换), háishì yào huàn (患)?*  
you be want replace, or want hazard  
‘Do you want to **replace** (it), or do you want a (safety) **hazard**?’

Incorporated in the small print text at the bottom of the poster was the injunction given in (2a), *Prevent danger before getting “burnt”!*, evoking an identically sounding proverb *Prevent danger before (it) happens*, given in (2b), in which the key fragment is written with a different character (然) and forms part of the expression meaning ‘in advance’ (未然 *wèirán*).

- (2)  
(2a) Explicit message: *Fáng huàn yú wèi rán (“燃”!)*  
prevent danger at not yet burn  
‘Prevent danger before getting burnt!’  
(2b) Implicit message: *Fáng huàn yú wèirán (然)*  
prevent danger at in advance  
‘Prevent danger before it happens!’

Surprised to encounter paronomasia in a public service poster, at first I thought examples (1) and (2) point at a difference between how punning

wordplay is used in Chinese and English, where – I assumed – it would be out of place in regulatory contexts. However, an internet search soon brought up a safety sign, given in (3), exploiting homophony between the verb *know* and the particle *no*. I also recalled a structurally ambiguous traffic safety slogan, given in (4) below, a humorous hybrid of the phrase *dead on time* and the saying *Better late than never*. The absence of a disambiguating comma before the preposition *on* made it possible to treat the homonymous word *dead* both as an adverb modifying the phrase *on time* and meaning ‘exactly’ and as an adjective meaning ‘not alive’:

(3) ***Know Safety, No Pain. No Safety, Know Pain.***

(4) *Better late than **dead** on time.*

Clearly neither English nor Chinese relegated ambiguity-based wordplay to poetry, punchlines of jokes or advertising slogans. What is more, they employed similar formal means to create it. Though fashioned in different languages, examples (1) – (4) owed their punning effect to homophony. The odd-numbered puns paralleled each other in structure and so did the even-numbered ones. Nonetheless I knew that there were differences in the prototypes around which English and Chinese puns were built as well as differences in how they were perceived and put to use in the two cultures. While speakers of English would associate punning with humor and apply the term ‘pun’ to most types of ambiguity-based wordplay, speakers of Chinese would regard *shuangguan*, which is how the word *pun* is usually rendered in Chinese, as a rhetorical device whose main purpose is not humor but communication of covert meanings, different from the explicitly conveyed ones. Laboring under the assumption that puns are “the lowest form of wit”, English-speaking punsters would offer assurances that “No pun was intended”. Chinese-speaking punsters, incorporating both age-old and totally new punning conceits into their spoken or written messages, would see no reason to accompany them with a Chinese version of *Pardon the pun*.

How do these differences in the perceived main purpose of punning (provoking mirth or indirect communication of meanings) and the perceived status of ambiguity-based wordplay (a trope of ill-repute<sup>1</sup> or a lofty rhetorical device) affect the ways in which puns are exploited in the two cul-

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<sup>1</sup> This is how I characterize puns in a (2020) paper using the relevance-theoretic framework to investigate the stigma they carry in the English-speaking world.

tures? To the best of my knowledge, this issue has not yet been addressed in the literature, at least not in a systematic way. Scattered remarks on the communicative functions of punning can be found in the existing Chinese-English contrastive studies of puns, but they focus mainly on purely formal features of punning or on proposing pun taxonomies (Li 2000; Ai 2007; Ai & Ai 2010; Shao et al. 2012). The purpose of this paper is to explore this under-researched area and to provide a systematic account of the functions served by the punning utterances in English and Chinese.

## 2. Object of analysis: punning utterances in English and Chinese

“The Oxford English Dictionary” defines punning as “the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect; a play on words” (Burchfield 1989). Each of the four examples in section 1 fits this definition. They all incorporate a fragment which correlates two distinct meanings by virtue of having a phonetic value shared by two different words. In the literature it is usually identified by the term ‘connector’, introduced in 1994 by Attardo, who defined it as “the ambiguous element of the utterance which makes the presence of two senses possible” (1994: 134). In puns (1) and (3), it is repeated in a different meaning yielding a category of utterance dubbed by Delabastita (1993) a horizontal pun. In (2) and (4), it activates two meanings, giving rise to what Delabastita called a vertical pun. However, of the two Chinese examples, only (2) comes close to being a prototypical *shuangguan*, defined in “The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary” as “the use of a word in such a way as to capture one meaning on the surface while hiding another” (Ling 2002). This formulation makes no provisions for horizontal puns, such as (1), and it speaks of conveying covert meanings, which is not really what is observed in (2): the sense of the word implied by its connector is rather ostentatiously signaled by the quotation marks around the key character. A prototypical *shuangguan* is better illustrated by example (5), a line from *Mengzi*, a 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE collection of conversations and anecdotes by the Confucian philosopher Mencius. During his audience with King Hui of Liang, he was allegedly told:

- (5) *Venerable Sir, you have not regarded one thousand leagues (li 里) too far to come, so you must have a way of **profiting** (li 利) my state?* (*Mengzi* 1A1; italics and parenthetical material added)

In the original, this line is a horizontal pun whose two connectors: the unit of length rendered as ‘league’ (*li* 里) and the verb ‘profit’ (利), are written with different characters, yet both are pronounced *li*. More importantly, and less obviously, the line is also a vertical pun since the real purpose of this choice of words is to make a veiled reference to another homophonous word, ‘propriety’ (禮), indicating one of Confucian virtues. The intended covert message thus is that Mengzi made a long journey to assist the king because it was a proper thing to do.

In the present discussion, ‘classical’ *shuangguan* like (5) are treated as a subset of *puns*, the latter term being applied to all forms of wordplay involving the use of an linguistic expression in a way that activates two or more meanings or different associations. Thus understood, puns arise when a potentially ambiguous linguistic fragment is placed in a context providing information that makes more than one of its potential meanings valid or at least salient.<sup>2</sup> This prevents the interpreter from deriving a single meaning of the connector fragment, forcing him to reprocess a verbal string which has already yielded a meaning and, consequently, use at least two meanings in deriving the full import of the message. An attempt at comparing and contrasting the specific ways in which puns are used in different language communities thus has to consider three major issues: (i) the characteristic features of the fragment which correlates two meanings, (ii) the contextual information which compels the interpreter to access these meanings, (iii) and the effects achievable through this configuration of meanings. These will be discussed in the next three sections.

### 3. Linguistic factors determining the punning potential of English and Chinese

#### 3.1. Homophony

What makes puns possible is the universal feature of homophony. In both English and Chinese, both homophone-rich languages, it enables the production of puns by exploiting related meanings of a linguistic expression (i.e. polysemy), unrelated meanings of an expression (i.e. homonymy) as well as differently spelled words which happen to sound identical.

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<sup>2</sup> A discussion of pun interpretation can be found in Giora (2003), Yus (2003) and Solska (2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2017).

In English, polysemy is most often exploited in vertical puns with one fully valid and one extraneous meaning, the latter often highlighting some aspect of the conceptual domain connected with the topic at hand. For instance, the review of a museum, given in (6), describes it metaphorically as being *First Class*, i.e. ‘excellent’. The inadmissible literal meaning of this phrase, a reference to first class carriages on passenger trains, highlights the fact that it is a railway museum. In the advertising slogan for Pentium processors in (9), the ‘computer processor’ sense of *xīn*, is a polysemic extension of *xīn* ‘heart’, while *bēnténg*, the Chinese equivalent of Pentium, retains its original sense of ‘gallop’, which emphasizes the speed of performance.

- (6) *The Old Railway Station: First Class (no pun intended!)*  
 (online review of Old Railway Station museum at Petworth, West Sussex)
- (7) Explicit message: *Gěi diànnǎo yī kē bēnténg de xīn* (芯).  
 give computer one CLF Pentium PRT processor  
 ‘Give your computer a Pentium processor’  
 Implicit message: *Gěi diànnǎo yī kē bēnténg de xīn* (心).  
 give computer one CLF gallop PRT heart  
 ‘Give your computer a galloping heart’

Homonymies tend to generate puns which yield two equally valid meanings. In the English witticism in (8), the noun *lie* oscillates between the unrelated meanings of ‘untruth’ and ‘a position of golf ball’. The word *shǎn* in (9), a jocular answer to a question why planes flying in the sky manage to avoid hitting stars is ambiguous between the ‘sparkle’ and ‘get out of the way’ readings.

- (8) *In politics as in golf: you’re trapped in one bad lie after another.*
- (9) *Yīnwèi xīngxīng huì shǎn.*  
 because stars can shǎn (閃)  
 ‘Because stars can sparkle/get out of the way’

Most of the examples in this article owe their effect to a multitude of potential punning connectors found in both English and Chinese in the form of identically pronounced words with different graphic representations.

English, whose script is alphabetic yet notorious for its loose sound-to-letter mapping, boasts numerous mono- and polysyllabic doublets (*no, know*), triplets (*seize, sees, seas*) and even quadruplets (*right, rite, wright and write*), which get utilized in endless pun-based advertising slogans,

book titles, newspaper headlines and punchlines of jokes. The potential of this kind is staggeringly higher in Modern Standard Chinese, whose smaller phonetic inventory and simpler phonotactics permit only 405 distinct syllables, compared with over 10,000 in English.<sup>3</sup> As a result, a single syllable encodes multiple morphemes, each represented in the Chinese logographic script with a different graph. Only 23 syllables have no homophonic characters, while some, such as *shi* or *yi*, can be written in dozens of different ways, making it possible to produce contrived texts that are almost impossible to process in the spoken form.

To the best of my knowledge, only in English do homophony-based puns exploit sub-lexical identity of sound. This is what we see in the witticism in (10), whose connector shares part of its phonetic form with an unexpressed word *pen*. As for supra-lexemic homophonies, in Chinese they are always phrase-based, of the type we saw in (7). In English, a phrasal connector can be observed in (6). In (11), the meaning correlating fragment is a string of sounds which is larger than a word and which sounds exactly like the word *sandwiches*.

(10) *The **pun** is mightier than a sword.*

(11) *Why can a man never starve in the Great Desert? Because he can eat **the sand which is there.***

Unlike English, Chinese only marginally produces puns based on the similarity of sound, i.e. near homophony. For instance, cryptic meanings get incorporated into text messages, emails or advertising slogans by the expedient of exploiting the rebus value of numerals, some of which are merely similar in sound to the words they represent. The sequence 1314, pronounced 'yī-sān-yī-sì' in Modern Standard Chinese, may represent the similar-sounding, rather than identically sounding idiomatic phrase *yīshēng yīshì* (一生一世, meaning 'from birth until death, always, forever').<sup>4</sup> In English, near homophony yields a large number of imperfect puns, whose connector is similar rather than identical in sound to another word. Many of these can be found in what Mieder (1982) describes as anti-proverbs (*Antisprichwörter*), i.e. transformations of well-known sayings. For instance, the witticism in (8) above distorts a popular saying by replacing the word *pen* with a similar sounding *pun*.

<sup>3</sup> The count goes to 1300 distinct syllable-tone combinations if we consider the tones, these however are ignored in punning.

<sup>4</sup> Note that in Cantonese both would sound identical: *jat1 saam1 jat1 sei3*.

### 3.2. Morphology

The main difference between the potential punning connectors available in English and Chinese stems from the word formation processes operating in the two languages. A pertinent fact about the English lexicon is that, in addition to numerous short monosyllabic and monomorphemic lexemes, it contains a large number of polysyllabic ones, whether loans or products of inflectional or derivational morphology. The horizontal pun in (12), the title of a book for expectant mothers, owes its existence to paronymy (i.e. the use of words with related derivations). The one in the city promotional slogan in (13) represents a false segmentation. The one in the title of a TV show in (14) is a punning blend of *California* and *fornication*. Morphemic ambiguity creates the pun in (15), where *wise* appears first as a free lexical morpheme and then as a derivational suffix. The teacher's comment on a new dry-erase whiteboard in (16), in addition to the standard reading of 'amazing', conveys a non-standard one, 'capable of being repeatedly marked upon', derived through relexicalisation.

(12) *What To **Expect** When You're **Expecting**.*

(13) *...and on the sixth day God created **MAN**chester.*

(14) ***Californication***

(15) *Some are **wise**, some are **otherwise**.*

(16) *Simply **remarkable**.*

Morphologically isolating and totally devoid of inflection, Chinese does not create paronymies. Instead, many of its punning utterances arise thanks to the fluidity of lexical categories: the effect of (7) above hinges on the fact that *bēnténg* is both a verb and a proper noun. Still, the major factor underlying the Chinese 'way of punning' is the language's monosyllabicity combined with morphemic ambiguity. Nearly all morphemes in Chinese are represented by a single syllable, with one syllable on average encoding 5.4 morphemes (Duanmu 1999). For instance, a comedian's jocular remark that after losing his job he became a writer (*zuòjiā* 作家) since he now spends his days idly sitting (*zuò* 坐) at home (*jiā* 家) exploits the fact that *jiā* (家) can be both a monomorphemic word meaning 'home' or a noun suffix corresponding to the English suffixes, such as *-ist* or *-er*.

Though most lexemes in present day Chinese are now disyllabic, their component syllables remain clearly demarcated units of sense, making



false segmentations or blends impossible. However, the language makes it possible to create unique horizontal puns, such as the advertising slogan for an optical clinic in (17), where the sequence of two syllables *jin* and *shi* is repeated four times, with the two functioning as distinct words or disyllabic lexemes.

- (17) *Jinshì* (近世) *jìn* (进) *shì* (士) *jìn* (尽) *shì* (是) *jìnshì* (近视).  
 near age advance scholar exhaustively be myopia  
 ‘These days a forward-moving professional is without exception shortsighted’

#### 4. Pun-enforcing factors

Pun-related scholarship has focused mainly on the most conspicuous, purely formal features of punning connectors: the meaning-sound configurations exhibited by puns and the structures of punning utterances have spawned numerous pun taxonomies (Tanaka 1992, 1994; Dynel 2010; Solska 2012a) and the phonetic patterns exhibited by punning connectors have inspired a number of phonological studies of puns (Zwicky 1976; Zwicky & Zwicky 1986; Sobkowiak 2001; Guidi 2012). And yet, a major pun-enforcing factor which brings more than one meaning of the connector into play is background information against which it is processed. What validates two distinct possible interpretations of the repeated connector in (1) and (3) is the co-text as well as the spelling of the key words. In (4), the ‘not alive’ sense of *dead* is made salient by the fact that the utterance is a traffic safety notice. In (8), what imbues the connector with two competing senses is the presence of the nouns *golf* and *politics*. The pun in (5) will only be apparent to those who are aware of how classical *shuangguan* work. Even this brief overview indicates that pun-enforcing contextual information can be linguistic, para-linguistic or extra-linguistic, meaning that its nature is to a large extent determined by the language of the pun and the culture this language is embedded in.

##### 4.1. Linguistic pun-enforcing factors

The linguistic material surrounding the fragment being processed, including the conceptual content provided by the connector fragment itself, draws the addressee’s attention to at least one of the (usually) two senses at play. In horizontal puns, such as (1) or (12), it disambiguates the connector in a different way on each of its occurrences. In vertical puns, it forces the addressee to accept two, sometimes conflicting senses of the

connector, as is the case with examples (8) and (9). In (6), the parenthetical comment *no pun intended* is (perversely) added to ensure that the reader will not overlook the pun.

The main difference I can observe between the two languages concerns the role of context in what I call evocative puns. These are utterances whose connector replaces a fragment of a set phraseology (an idiom, proverb, title of book or a movie, etc.), which allows it to evoke another word, which usually fills that slot. The title of a documentary on the hysteria following the tragic death of Lady Diana Spencer, given in (18), echoes the identically sounding *The Morning After*, the title of a mystery thriller. The anti-proverb in (11) puns on the standard proverb *The pen is mightier than a sword*.

(18) *Diana: The Mourning After*.

Chinese puns of this sort seem to exploit only perfect homophony. The title of a book in (19) provides a relevant example. In this punning distortion of a Mao-era slogan, the key word *qián* (钱 ‘money’) is used in place of a homophonous word meaning ‘forward’, which is expressed with a different character (前).

- (19) Explicit message: *Xiàng qián* (钱) *kàn*  
 toward money look  
 ‘Look to the money’  
 Evoked message: *Xiàng qián* (前) *kàn*  
 toward forward look  
 ‘Look forward to the future’

Both in English and Chinese-speaking world language users will have in their memory a large number of set expressions, each of them ready to be brought into action in a punning utterance. This is precisely what happens in another, uniquely Chinese type of an evocative pun. Instead of evoking a different word, whether identically or similar sounding, it brings into play multiple meanings it carries in other common phraseologies it is a part of even though the punning utterance it is incorporated into contains only one of them. This can be observed in the advertising slogan for breast enhancing cream in (20), whose most apparent meaning, ‘It is good to be a woman’, is based on treating the key word *tǐng* (挺) as the adverb ‘very’, forming the explicitly conveyed phrase *tǐng hǎo* (挺好 ‘very good’). However, *tǐng* can also function as an adjective meaning ‘straight, upright’, forming a set phrase *bǐtǐng* (笔挺 ‘standing

straight'), and a verb meaning 'push out', part of a collocation *tǐng xiōng* (挺胸, i.e. 'push out one's chest'). As noted by Jin (2006:197), all of these meanings are brought to bear in (20), which essentially communicates that it is good for a woman to stand up straight and push out her chest, presumably to show off her breasts. In other words, the slogan conveys the idea that it is good for a woman to have big breasts. The mechanism of imbuing the key fragment of a pun with readings it may carry in unexpressed collocations seems to be absent from English.

- (20) Explicit meaning: *Zuò nǚrén tǐng* (挺) *hǎo*  
 be woman **very** good  
 Evoked meanings [bitǐng: (stand) **straight**]  
 [tǐng xiōng: **push out** (chest)]  
 Intended meaning: 'It is good for a woman to have big breasts'

#### 4.2. Graphemic representation: a para-linguistic pun-enforcing factor

Examples (1) and (3) would make little or no sense if presented in speech. The pun in (2) might be missed if the quotation marks did not draw attention to the key fragment. The biblical reference in (13) would not vanish in speech, yet the capitalization of the *Man* fragment of *Manchester* makes it much more prominent. And yet, graphemic issues as a pun-enforcing factor have received very scant attention in the literature. In English pun-related research this is understandable: after all, linguistic studies of written, as opposed to spoken English, hardly ever consider the nature of the language's alphabetic script. It is impossible to do so with written Chinese. Prototypical *shuangguan*, with their overt-covert meaning configurations, to a large extent owe their existence to the Chinese writing system, with its multitude of morpheme-encoding logograms, allowing to write each syllable in many different ways.

Paradoxically, although it is ideal for conveying cryptic messages, which can be lost on some readers, the Chinese script sometimes makes clear connections that in English are not instantly obvious. The relatedness of polysemic meanings can be overlooked in English but in Chinese, polysemic puns often utilize logograms which share the phonetic component (and pronunciation), but which differ in the so-called radical, i.e. in the semantic component. In (7), the character 芯, representing 'core' or a 'computer processor' sense of *xīn*, merely adds a grass radical 艹 to the character 心, representing the 'basic' sense, i.e. 'heart'.

Yet another script-related observation concerns the attitudes to the writing systems serving the two languages. In the English-speaking world, they are purely utilitarian, but in China the characters function as a powerful symbol of the nation's unity, a repository of cultural values to be cherished and protected. The reason for the quotation marks in the safety poster in (2) is legal. A directive issued in November 2014 by SARFT (State Administration for Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television) prohibited the perceived “irregular and inaccurate use of the Chinese language, especially the misuse of idioms”, and regulated the use of puns in the mass media. From then on special graphic symbols had to be used to indicate the departure from the norm, i.e. from the standard use, phrasing and meanings of characters and idioms.

### 4.3. The extra-linguistic pun-enforcing factors

Many puns are instantly obvious to a sufficiently proficient learner of the language. Some become apparent only to the interpreters equipped with the necessary extralinguistic knowledge. This may include the physical setting in which communication is taking place as well as the language user's experiences, memories, encyclopedic and other knowledge as well as religious and other beliefs. The punning character of *Superior By Nature*, a tagline promoting the Canadian city of Thunder Bay, is apparent only to those who know it is located on Lake Superior. *Yes, We Scan*, a slogan which was contrived in response to the news of the US global surveillance program and which plagued president Barack Obama during his 2013 visit to Germany, was perceived as a pun only by those who were familiar with the *Yes, We Can* slogan of his presidential campaign.

Yet another source of extra-linguistic information which may prevent the interpreter from settling for just one reading of the key element of a pun comes from social norms, cultural assumptions and values, which would be different for speakers of English and Chinese. In order to be noticed, *shuangguan* require a reader who knows he should be on the lookout for double meanings, which are likely to be culturally important, such as propriety in (5), or potentially embarrassing, such as breast size in (20) or emotions. In Solska (2019b), I argued that stylistic figures of this sort are a product of a high-context culture. This notion, proposed by Hall (1976), is applied to communities whose members tend to communicate in ways that are indirect and heavily dependent on common contextual knowledge, unlike low-context culture communities, which put a premium on

directness, explicitness and lack of ambiguity. The communities we find in the English-speaking world are by no means uniform, with the British often described as being high-context, unlike most Americans. However, compared with the Chinese culture, even the British fall toward the low-context end of the communicating scale.

Part of the shared knowledge involves awareness of the core values of a given society, such as the notion of social harmony, one of the cornerstones of the Chinese civilization, which dictates that each of its members should perform his or her social role as dutifully as possible, attempting to prevent conflict and avoid confrontation or direct criticism. One of the ways of achieving this is to conduct social interactions in a way that recognizes one's own position in society as well as the position and respectability of the others. In other words, by regard for the people's face. The open expression of emotions may be appreciated in the English-speaking world but in China doing so might lead to a loss of face. An effective way of being non-committal and thus face-saving involves fashioning *shuangguan*.

## **5. Language functions: an organizing principle**

What do speakers of English and Chinese achieve by producing puns? Scholarly reflection on the purposes verbal messages may serve has, on one hand, yielded a number of proposals, specifying the so-called functions of language and, on the other hand, comments on the futility of trying to establish them (cf. Halliday 1978:186). Conceding the limitations of the very notion, I have nonetheless decided that language functions would make an appropriate organizing principle for the discussion of the communicative purposes behind the use of puns in the two languages. Having considered a number of available options (Halliday 1978; Brown & Yule 1983; Leech 1974) I have settled on the list proposed by Jakobson (1960), to this day a go-to reference in both linguistics and literary studies. Halliday's proposal seemed irrelevant for my discussion since it is not so much concerned with language functions in general but with functions that language has for children in their early years. Brown and Yule's model, recognizing only two major functions – transactional and interactional – was too reductionist, while Leech's made no provisions for the metalingual function, which I believe is most essential in punning utterances. In what follows I compare and contrast English and Chinese puns with respect to how they realize Jakobson's six functions, fully aware that usually more

than one function is at play. Though the order in which they are mentioned is usually different, I will start with the metalingual and poetic functions, which I believe is exhibited by all puns, before considering their poetic, emotive, conative, phatic and referential uses.

## 6. The overview of functions of punning utterances

### 6.1. Metalinguistic uses of puns

Using language to talk about the language itself is the essence of messages realizing the metalingual or metalinguistic function. Though usually mentioned last, and missing from some proposals in the case of puns, this function has to go to the forefront. After all, making a pun involves careful manipulation of form and meaning resulting in an utterance which compels the comprehender to pause and reflect on the mechanics of language processing. This invitation to metalinguistic reflection, characterizing all puns, has been noted by practitioners of applied linguistics who have advocated exploiting their pedagogical value in foreign language teaching. The argument they use is that the metalingual element inherent to puns can help raise learners' awareness of a whole range of issues pertaining to vocabulary and orthography, phonology, morphology and syntax, appropriacy and style, text types, discourse and even pragmatic competence (Cook 2000; Lems 2013; Solska 2019a).

Interestingly, the point of some puns is in fact exactly to showcase linguistic issues. In China, there is a millennia-old tradition of explaining the meaning of a character by using another, its homophone or a near-homophone, i.e. by providing a *paronomastic gloss*. In *Shuowen Jiezi*, the first comprehensive Chinese dictionary dating to the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, the entry for *ghost* (*guǐ*), given in (21), offers an explanation that this is a condition human beings revert to (*guī*). The *Shiming* dictionary, compiled a century later, contains 1,502 definitions of this sort, and is essentially a collection of puns produced in an attempt to establish semantic connections between the word being defined and the word defining it.

- (21) *Rén suǒ guī wèi guǐ*  
 Man place return (歸) be ghost (鬼)  
 'A ghost is where (the state that) human beings return to.'

In present day China, this practice can still be found in the form of horizontal puns describing some aspect of reality in a way that is jocular, profound or both. (22) – (23) are the relevant examples:

- (22) *Lǎogōng* (老公), *jiù shì láogōng* (劳工).  
 husband            just be    work labor  
 ‘A husband is hard labor’.
- (23) *Shīqù* (失去), *jiù shì shíqǔ* (拾取).  
 lose go            just be    collect take  
 ‘Losing something is gaining something.’

In the English-speaking world, purely metalingually-oriented puns seem to represent the ludic rather than the philosophical dimension of pun use, unless we acknowledge that they in fact highlight such properties of language as duality or arbitrariness. The absurd logic the Mock Turtle uses in “Alice in Wonderland” to explain, in (24), why his Old Master at school was given his nickname, is based on the fact that in British English both *tortoise* and *taught us* have the same pronunciation:

- (24) *we called him Tortoise* [ˈtɔ:ɪ.təs] *because he taught us* [ˈtɔ:ɪ.t əs].

More recent examples of such pun-based absurd humor include mock redefinitions of words, as in (25) and (26), as well as nonsensical captions of memes, violating grammatical rules and accompanied by a visual representation of the key word: in (27) and (28) a picture of respectively a sheep and an orange:

- (25) *Diode* – a pair of two long poems (di- and ode)
- (26) *Syntax* – a tariff on immorality (a tax on sin)
- (27) *Ewe Are the Best* (i.e., You...)
- (28) *Orange You Glad To See Me?* (i.e., Aren't...?)

## 6.2. Poetic function

Arguably all puns realize the poetic function of language, i.e. the function which pertains to phrasing the message in a way that best fits whatever purpose it is intended to serve. If they did not, language users would not go out of their way to produce them. The extensive research conducted over the last few decades into the most conspicuous uses of punning utterances has identified a number of cognitive and interpersonal communicative effects achievable through punning, namely:

- (i) the rich meaning package: puns provide an economical way of communicating an array of meanings,

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- (ii) attention-grabbing: puns tend to capture the attention of the audience,
  - (iii) memorability: puns tend to be remembered,
  - (iv) wittiness: puns demonstrate creativity in using language,
  - (v) humorousness: usually attributed to some incongruity inherent in them and the surprise resulting from discovering it.

These communicative effects attainable by puns make them particularly effective as advertising slogans (cf. Goddard 1998; Tanaka 1992, 1994; van Mulken et al. 2005), including city promotional slogans (cf. Solska & Rojczyk 2015). They make them a perfect choice for headlines, film or book titles (cf. Dor 1995; Chovanec 2005). They also make them singularly well-suited to appear in punchlines of jokes or in witticisms (as established by Attardo 1994). One may add that in longer pieces of discourse, horizontal puns may provide textual cohesion by focusing the audience's attention on some major theme or form. In (5), that theme is one of Confucian virtues; in Shakespeare's Sonnet 135, that form is the word *will*, repeated 13 times in at least 6 different meanings.

The poetic function of language also embraces the perceived aesthetic value of verbal messages. Generating affective meanings in addition to conceptual meaning is an aspect of punning which has long been acknowledged and studied in both Western and Chinese rhetorical and literary traditions. In the West, a whole family of pun-related figures has been recognized, with 'paronomasia' being the most general term for punning wordplay.<sup>5</sup> As could be expected, some of these differ from classical Chinese *shuangguan* with respect to their formal qualities, a presentation of which would be too space-consuming for this short article and which falls outside its purview. What lies within its scope is the difference in the status they have in their respective cultures. In the West, especially in the English-speaking world, puns tend to be viewed as somewhat crude and often loud; in general, a figure of speech of lesser value. Dismissed by Dryden as "the lowest and most groveling form of wit", they do not come close to being as appreciated as the metaphor, a device which takes pride of place among stylistic devices. Not so in the Chinese culture, where that honor goes to *shuangguan* and where re-

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to paronomasia, these include *antanaclasis* (repetition of a word in a different sense), *polyptoton* (repetition of words derived from the same root) and *asteismus* (a mocking or humorous reply that plays on a word). The two latter figures are not always pun-based.



sorting to ambiguity-based wordplay has been seen as a desirable verbal skill associated with subtlety, good education and wit.

### 6.3. Emotive: from self-expression to hidden anger

The emotive function of language focuses on the producer of the message. It is evidenced especially in works of poetry, which tend to be created out of the poet's need for self-expression and which often capture his or her emotional state. A striking difference in the use of puns and *shuangguan* is connected with the kind of emotions they are made to convey. English puns, typically conspicuous and difficult to overlook, are not normally coined to reveal being in love. For instance, the reader of Shakespeare's Sonnet 138 is fully aware that the lyrical subject is pursuing a relationship with a woman. The three senses of the word *lie*, which are exploited in the poem (telling untruths, deceiving oneself and having sex), serve to depict the dynamics of this love affair. Unlike English puns, Chinese *shuangguan*, which are low-key and easy to overlook, are often chosen to confess love in an unobvious way. Consider (29), a line from a Tang dynasty poem by Li Shangyin, which is seemingly about silkworms making silk until they die. However, a perceptive reader will notice that the word indicating silk (*sī*) sounds identical to the word indicating thought, affection, thinking of someone or something, written with a different character (思). Thus (29) is really a veiled confession that the poet will not stop thinking about his beloved till the end of his life.

- (29) Explicit message: *Chūn cán dào sī sī (丝) fāngjīn*  
 spring silkworm till die **silk** no more  
 'Only when they die will spring silkworms stop making *silk*.'  
 Implicit message: 'Only when I die will I stop *thinking about* (you).'

The 'silk' *shuangguan* thus enables the poet to communicate his deepest feelings in a very subtle and socially accepted way. In the high-context Chinese culture he can be confident that the intended message will not be lost on the person or people that matter to him.

Obviously, the expression of emotions is not limited to love and affection. Speakers of both English and Chinese may resort to punning if they want to express disdain, derision or give vent to their anger. In both cultures, the inherent ambiguity of puns makes them convenient for conveying such potentially confrontational emotions in a way that prevents open conflict.

When news of the SARFT directive, mentioned in section 4.2, was reported in the English-speaking media, it was decried as the Chinese “crack-down on puns” and the comment sections of online newspapers exploded with pun-rich postings, some of which are listed below:

- (30) *You china be funny?* (‘trying to’)
- (31) *There won’t be a **Man darin**’ to pun.* (‘Mandarin’)
- (32) *The jail will be renamed House of **Pun**.*
- (33) *One could call it cruel and unusual **pun**-ishment.*
- (34) *Well, China, it either was **Mao** or never.* (‘now’)

In much the same way, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Chinese netizens flooded the cyberspace with pun-based memes poking fun at the decision made by Hu Jintao, leader of the Chinese Communist Party, to elevate the notion of social harmony to the status of China’s official political philosophy. All of them featured ‘river crabs’, i.e. creatures whose name, *héxiè* (河蟹), phonetically resembles the word indicating ‘harmony’ *héxié* (和谐).

#### 6.4. Conative function, extending to entertaining, didactic, magical and preemptive uses of puns

Defined as using language to modify the hearer’s behaviour, the conative function is particularly obvious in advertising slogans, whose purpose is to persuade the prospective customer to buy the advertised product or service. Whether punning or not, these work the same way in English and in Chinese. However, a special aspect of Chinese advertising is that the very name of a product may function as a selling point. Some brand names carry a very clear meaning and thus an Opel (*Ōubǎo* 欧宝) constitutes a ‘European treasure’, a BMW (*Bǎomǎ* 宝马) a ‘precious horse’, Lenovo (*Liánxiǎn* 联想) connotes ‘mental connections’ and Pentium (*Bēnténg* 奔腾) a ‘galloping’ performance. Pun-based punchlines of jokes, produced to evoke laughter, would represent another example of using language to affect the audience, one that is essentially the same in both cultures. As utterances (1) – (4) indicate, puns are also occasionally used to encourage safe behavior of both English and Chinese speakers. However, only in the Chinese culture do we encounter cases where puns are used to promote or at least stimulate the ethically appropriate conduct. It is not surprising that

Ames' 2008 article on Mengzi is tellingly titled "Paronomasia: A Confucian Way of Making Meaning".

In Chinese, the conative function extends not only to teaching morality via puns but to the symbolic or even magical uses of wordplay. As is well known, the Chinese deem number four (*sì*) inauspicious because it sounds like the verb 'to die' (*sǐ*). Bats are symbols of good fortune because the words 'bat' and 'good fortune' have identical pronunciation (*fú*). Wordplay is often used as a smart way to avoid saying or doing things felt to bring misfortune. In emails and text messages the ominous word *cǎnjù* ('tragedy') is often replaced by the innocuous 'tableware' (*cānjù*), and clocks and watches are never desired as gifts: after all *sòng zhōng*, 'to offer a clock,' sounds exactly like 'attend upon a dead person'. As can be seen, the use of homophones aligns with Chinese notions of superstition.

One more noteworthy way in which the conative function of puns manifests itself involves refraining from using a potential pun to prevent possible undesirable actions on the part of the powerful audience. After the second world war, a novelist and journalist Shen Dehong thought it prudent to change his penname. Adopted in the 1920s, *Máodùn* ('contradiction'), was a perfect choice, reflecting as it did tensions in revolutionary ideology. In Communist China, it became dangerous, so Shen replaced its first component with an identically sounding word, thus changing his moniker to a meaningless but safe 'thatch shield'. Is such preemptive avoidance of unintentional puns practiced in the English-speaking world? Absolutely! It has been rumored that Harry, Duke of Sussex and his wife, Meghan Markle rejected the title of the Earl of *Dumbarton* for their son Archie, for fear that the *dumb* fragment it incorporates would make him a butt of crude jokes.

### 6.5. Phatic uses of puns

Typically realized through messages whose informative content is low, the phatic function of language evinces itself through formulaic expressions of greeting, inquiries about the interlocutors' well-being as well as remarks about trivial topics or apparently irrelevant or obvious facts, such as the weather. In Solska (forthcoming) I pointed out that a social game dubbed ping-pong punning may constitute another phatically-oriented verbal practice since it involves exploiting the punning potential of situationally relevant words in order to create an atmosphere of sociability and establish personal communion between the interactants. Pun-laden

comments (30) – (34) above on the restrictions on pun use in Chinese mass media can be seen as one of many examples of this practice. Another one, indulged in by both English and Chinese speakers, erupted on social media in 2012, when the followers of Jeremy Lin, a hugely successful American basketball player of Chinese descent started to express their admirations for their idol as well as their solidarity with other fans by engaging in (depending on their language) ‘Linsanity’ or ‘Lin Fengzi’, that is the obsessive (ab)use of the athlete’s name in puns. Speakers of English would construct ‘Linisms’, or words blended with the athlete’s name, and incorporate them into their comments to Lin-related online articles or into the Twitter messages. Examples include:

(35) *Glad NY could get a hold of a good, **Lin**-telligent player*

(36) ***Lin**teresting **Lin**deed ;)*

(37) *Are you a **Lin**-guist? Tweet your words to us @linwords.*

The Chinese version of this phenomenon involved fashioning nicknames for the idol, which would playfully manipulate the athlete’s Chinese name Lín Shūháo (林书豪). Thus when Lin’s team emerged from a game undefeated, he was renamed Zero-Loss Hao (*líng shū háo* 零输). In this moniker, the first character was replaced with a similar sounding *líng* (‘zero’) and the second with a homophonous *shū* (‘loss’). After a seven game winning streak under Jeremy’s leadership, he was dubbed 007 (*líng líng qī*), a clear reference to the code number of the fictitious British Intelligence Officer, James Bond.

On the grounds of linguistic theories of politeness, producing puns of this sort would be construed as a positive politeness strategy, meant to express solidarity with the hearer or some third party. As could be expected, punning can also be used as a negative politeness strategy, allowing the speaker to mitigate the expression of hostility toward the hearer or some third party. The seemingly meaningless (38), a witticism attributed to Mark Twain, is a case in point. Evoking *the Nile*, a similar sounding name of an African river, it is a toned down version of the impolite blunt refusal. A simple *No!* would be much more confrontational.

(38) ***Denial** ain’t just a river in Egypt.*

In the Chinese culture, resorting to *shuangguan* can function as a way to preserve the speaker’s own face as well as the face of the address-

see. The lyrical subject of the ‘silkworms’ poem spared himself and his audience the embarrassment of openly discussing his intimate feelings. A careful choice of *shuangguan* provided him with a face-saving way of broaching a socially unaccepted topic. *Shuangguan* use can also provide a way of ‘giving’ face to the interlocutor, i.e. indicating appreciation of his social standing. In her unpublished dissertation Ai (2007:3) mentions a telegram message consisting of a single character *yǔn* (允), sent by a woman whose given name (*Yǔnhe*) incorporated the character. The purpose of the telegram was to inform the addressee that he had obtained her father’s permission (*yǔn*) to marry her sister. Performing a double function of telegram message and the signature of its sender, the single character constituted an ingenious pun. By choosing this very laconic form of conveying factual information Yunhe not only demonstrated her own superior verbal skills but her conviction that the addressee was an intelligent man of high learning, capable of unravelling the cryptic message and worthy of marrying her equally sophisticated sister. The message was a face-giving warm welcome to the family.

## 6.6. Referential uses of puns

Representing the use of language to convey factual information, the referential function dominates in lectures and conference presentations, news programs, scholarly literature and technical manuals, i.e. texts typically associated with providing descriptions and classifications, offering explanations and clarifications. Their quality, both in English and Chinese, to a large extent depends on clarity, precision and the lack of ambiguity. When puns appear in them, they serve other functions, mainly conative and expressive and always metalingual and poetic. The pun-based sexual innuendo in (39) constitutes an unexpected comic relief in a text on linguistics, raising the likelihood that the term *morphological stripping* will be understood and remembered. The parenthetical information in (40) draws attention to the pun and its author’s wittiness.

- (39) Using a technique called morphological **stripping** (get your mind out of the gutter!), morphologists provide a morpheme breakdown of long words, which allows them to find the root of a word. (from a book “Linguistics for Dummies”)
- (40) It is fitting, especially in the context of this issue of *Romantic Praxis*, that Paul Yoder opens his article with John Locke’s philosophy of language

on his way to showing how Blake's **unlocks** (to use the elegant pun of Yoder's title) language [...]. (from a polemical reply to an article by Paul Yoder)

Referentially used puns often appear in titles of academic and other books, articles, documentaries, where they provide a summary of the contents in a way that is compact, witty and humorous, and thus attention-grabbing and memorable:

- (41) *The **Gravity** of the Situation: Crash Course Astronomy* (title of a YouTube video)
- (42) *Archaeology: **Date** with history.* (title of an article in "Nature")
- (43) *There is no **getting** round **Gettier**.* (title of an article in "The Journal of Pragmatics")

In the Chinese language context, ingenious referentially-intended texts are created serving as an aid to memorize strings of numbers, such as telephone numbers or the value of  $\pi$ . Its first few digits can be easily committed to memory thanks to a 'poem' whose first line is given in (44). Exploiting the phonetic resemblance of numerals to other words, the author chose the syllable *shān* to represent *sān* ('three'), and *hú* to represent *wǔ* ('five').

- (44) Explicit reading: *Shān diān yī sì yī hú jiǔ.*  
 hill top one temple one jug wine  
 'At the hilltop, a temple and a jug of wine.'
- Intended reading: *sān diǎn yī sì yī wǔ jiǔ*  
 '3.14159'

The section on the referential uses of puns would be incomplete without a presentation of a uniquely Chinese way of communication factual information by omission. There is an anecdote about a letter which Sima Xiangru, a Han Dynasty scholar, sent to his wife to inform her of his decision to divorce her. The letter consisted entirely of a string of numbers. Missing from it, however, was a character 亿 (*yì*), representing 'a hundred million', and homophonous with such words as 意 ('feeling, affection'), 忆 ('memory') and 义 ('relationship'). The message the woman was supposed to recover was 'I have no feelings for you', 'I wish to forget you' or 'I want our relationship to end'.

This penchant for leaving out the crucial part of the utterance, is not restricted to poetry. All native speakers of Chinese occasionally quote spe-

cial ‘tail-omitted’ sayings, called *xiēhòuyǔ*, literally ‘sayings with the latter-part suspended’. They consist of two parts, the first of which describes some situation and is always stated. The second part, which carries the relevant message, typically remains unsaid. A speaker of Chinese may express the idea of ‘Everything’s lost!’ by uttering a seemingly irrelevant *Confucius moving house*. The omitted relevant second part is *Nothing but books* (尽是书 *Jìn shì shū*), whose last word is homophonous with the verb ‘to lose’ (输).

## 7. Concluding remarks

An artefact of ambiguity, the phenomenon of punning probably exists in all languages. In this article I compared and contrasted (i) the punning potential of English and Chinese resulting from the peculiarities of the phonological and morphological features exhibited by these two languages as well as (ii) the functions punning utterances serve in the English- and Chinese-speaking worlds, grounded in the cultural backgrounds the two languages are embedded in. To systematize the discussion I have adopted Jakobson’s list of six language functions as the organizing principle. I am aware of the limitations of such an approach. More research definitely needs to be conducted into the social and the affective aspects of punning, grounded in a framework better suited to this purpose than Jakobson’s model. Considering the paucity of contrastive English-Chinese studies on puns, I see my publication as a small contribution, providing some insights into this under-explored area.

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### **The functions of punning utterances in English and Chinese: a cross-cultural perspective**

Capitalizing on the universal linguistic feature of ambiguity, punning utterances can be found in languages as distinct as the Indo-European, marginally inflected English and the Sino-Tibetan, monosyllabic, inflectionless Chinese. Though forming a tiny fraction of the utterances produced in these languages, they tend to stand out and can be encountered in diverse communicative settings, including poetry and prose, jokes and comedy routines, advertising slogans and book titles. Whether perceived as “the lowest form of wit” or a lofty rhetorical device, they perform a wide range of functions which are often grounded in distinct cultural and historical backgrounds they are embedded in. The objective of this article is to identify the most striking differences in the functions served by typical English and Chinese puns and to investigate the cultural factors underlying these differences. Adopting Jakobson’s model of language functions as the organizing principle for the discussion, I examine a range of puns in the two languages, comparing and contrasting the motivations for their use.

**Keywords:** puns, English, Chinese, language functions, high- and low-context cultures.