The Metaphorical and Cognitive Mechanism of Puns in "Hamlet"

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Abstract: Metaphor is an important mode of human thinking and plays a crucial cognitive role in the constructing and construing of puns. Both puns and metaphors are cross-domain mappings based on the similarities between two conceptual domains, thus sharing a homogeneous nature. "Hamlet", the most important dramatic work of Shakespeare, is, at the same time, also the work in which the rhetorical device of pun is used most frequently. This thesis analyzes the cognitive mechanism of different types of puns in "Hamlet" from the perspective of metaphor theories of cognitive linguistics, explores their patterns of mapping from surface conceptual domain to deep conceptual domain and ultimately reveals their cognitive laws.

Keywords: "Hamlet"; Puns; Metaphorical Mechanism; Mapping

1. Introduction

Written between 1601 and 1602, "Hamlet", along with "Macbeth", "King Lear", and "Othello" constitutes Shakespeare's "Four Great Tragedies". Hailed as the most dazzling diamond in the crown of Shakespeare's plays, this work holds a pivotal position in his dramatic oeuvre. Adapted from a 12th-century Danish folktale, "Hamlet" is renowned for its gripping plot and profound language, crowning as the pinnacle Shakespeare's literary achievement.

Shakespeare's remarkable achievements are attributed to his sublime mastery of language and exceptional use of rhetorical artistry. And "Hamlet" stands as a paradigmatic example of rhetorical craftsmanship among his plays. In this longest and most celebrated works by Shakespeare, as many as 20 kinds of rhetorical devices are employed, with a staggering frequency of 1062.9 instances per 1000 lines of text [1].

The pun plays an essential role in Shakespeare's rhetorical devices. As one of the oldest rhetorical devices in English, it is defined in The Oxford English Dictionary [2] 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." In essence, it is a wordplay that exploits homophones or homophones for rhetorical effect.

Incomplete statistics suggest that Shakespeare employed approximately over 3,000 puns throughout his works, averaging 78 puns per play [3]. Keller's [1] research specifically identifies 272 instances of punning in the original text of "Hamlet", occurring at a remarkable frequency of 71 puns per 1,000 lines. This substantial evidence establishes punning as a distinctive stylistic hallmark of "Hamlet" [4]. Therefore, analyzing puns becomes an indispensable key to understanding "Hamlet".

2. Metaphorical Thinking and Cognition

Cognitive linguistics, grounded in embodied philosophy, aims to elucidate the interactions and relationships between cognition, thinking, and language. Sperber and Wilson [5] argue that human communication activities (verbal or nonverbal) are fundamentally cognitive activities. As a perception and conceptualization tool for humans to understand the surrounding world [6], metaphor is an integral tool for language development, providing a new perspective for humans to understand things, to experience the objective world, and to reveal the laws of language phenomena. It is not merely a linguistic phenomenon — it is, at its core, a cognitive phenomenon. It serves as both the origin and the outcome of cognition. "The essence of metaphor", as it is elucidated by Lakoff & Johnson [7], "is

understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." It is a cross-domain interaction and mapping based on similarity between two entities, whose cognitive mechanism facilitates analogical reasoning, enabling humans to draw connections between disparate concepts and derive meaning through comparison and abstraction.

There are numerous metaphorical phenomena in puns. The British linguist Nash [8], who first noticed the interactivity between metaphor and puns, listed metaphor as one of the means of constructing puns, creating the new term "pun - metaphors". He [9] further noted that "punning is akin to metaphor". This perspective was later substantiated by Wang Xijie, who insightfully proposed [10] that "the metaphors discussed in literary studies are actually both metaphors and puns — metaphorical puns, or punning metaphors". There exists a profound internal connection between the two most important rhetorical devices. Therefore, metaphorical puns contain both implicit and explicit meanings, which are metaphors in form yet function as puns in essence. In general, metaphors can serve as a vehicle for achieving punning effects.

The pun is not merely a rhetorical device—it serves a cognitive function in guiding human experience. By highlighting similarities and correlations between disparate concepts, puns reflect the mind's capacity to establish conceptual connections, making them fundamentally a cognitive act. Metaphor, as a vital means for people to perceive objective things, plays a significant cognitive role in analyzing and understanding puns, which are themselves products of cognitive processes. Traditional studies of puns have been mostly static, adopting outdated and mono-dimensional perspectives that focus solely on the rhetorical effects of puns, while neglecting their cognitive dimension — the dynamic mental mechanisms underlying them. In the light of these deficiencies, this paper draws on cognitive linguistic theories of metaphor to examine punning as a unique yet universal linguistic phenomenon, exploring the metaphorical and psychological mechanisms behind the shifts of categories of puns.

3. The Metaphorical Mechanism of Puns in "Hamlet"

The pun, a remarkably expressive rhetorical device, embodies the very essence of linguistic ingenuity. As Chen Wangdao [11] aptly defines it, a pun simultaneously engages with two distinct concepts through a single lexical item. By fully utilizing homonymy and polysemy, it achieves quintessential quality of "harmonious jingling upon words" [12]. This profound and extensive rhetorical device is both a product of the development of human cognitive capacity and an important manifestation of the laws governing human cognition. In a sense, puns are also a cognitive phenomenon. It is not only a rhetorical device, but also a cognitive model for people to "associating two things by exploring their similarities in the cognitive domain" [13]. It is the result of metaphorical thinking and a representation of metaphorical culture. Metaphorical thinking is the primitive thinking of humans, permeating into various levels of language. Thus, exploring the generative mechanism of puns in "Hamlet" through a cognitive-metaphorical lens will enable a systematic interpretation of punning's cognitive patterns and a comprehensive understanding of its conceptual operations.

3.1 Classification of Pun Devices in "Hamlet"

The categorization of puns has been approached from multiple perspectives with varying methodologies, some of which are based on functionality, such as Wen Jun's [14]; some on form, such as Li Xinhua's [15]; some on sources, such as Barnet's [16]; and some on the relationship between semantics and syntax, such as Brown's [17]. So far, there has been no consensus in academia regarding the classification system for puns.

Scholars on Shakespeare's "Hamlet" demonstrate notable discrepancies in the categorization of puns within the play. Keller [1], through quantitative analysis of pun frequency in "Hamlet", classified the identified wordplay into four distinct types: antanaclasis (homographic puns), asteismus (quibbling puns), paronomasia (paronymic puns), and syllepsis (double-meaning puns). In contrast, Xie Guixia [18] proposed a tripartite taxonomy: homographic puns, homophonic puns, and sylleptic puns. While these classification systems differ in their specific groupings, they fundamentally share a common analytical basis — all essentially rely on either phonological overlap (sound resemblance), or semantic congruence (meaning intersection).

Given this study's focus on exploring the metaphorical-cognitive mechanisms underlying puns, a novel classification system for puns in "Hamlet", based on differential modes of cross-domain mapping,

is proposed. This framework categorizes Shakespearean wordplay into four distinct types according to their conceptual operation, namely, phonetic puns, semantic puns, contextual puns, and structural puns.

3.2 The metaphorical mechanism of puns in "Hamlet"

As an implicit rhetorical device, "delicately beating around the bush" is one of the important semantic features of pun. Within punning mechanisms, seemingly unrelated things are construed through cognitive devices such as reconstruction, association, reasoning, and transfer. Crucially these devices are independent of metaphorical cognition. As Yu Yingtao [19] establishes, both the construction and deconstruction of puns are metaphorically-grounded cognitive acts. The cognitive processes of both pun creators and interpreters are inextricably intertwined with metaphorical thinking patterns. The metaphorical essence of puns manifests in their capacity for cross-domain cognitive mapping. And this characteristic of puns demonstrates the generalizing power of human metaphorical cognition. The extensive corpus of puns in "Hamlet" will accurately and reliably reflect various types of cognitive mapping embedded in puns. Hence the analysis of the metaphorical patterns of these puns will further illuminate the mechanisms of generating and construing of puns.

3.2.1 Phonetic puns

Phonetic puns represent a category of wordplay that establishes connections between surface and underlying meanings through homophones. Due to the fact that they are constructed on phonetic identity or similarity, these puns are alternatively termed "phonetic metaphors". Phonetic metaphor refers to the resemblance between sound and the referent or meaning expressed, that is, the "signifier" and "signified" [20]. It is a phenomenon of mapping similarities between phonetic forms and their semantic counterparts [21]. The term "metaphor" in cognitive linguistics is typically defined as "to say one domain in terms of another". By extension, phonetic puns constitute cognitive bridges connecting acoustic patterns to conceptual content.

Ivan Fónagy [22], who first proposed the concept of "phonetic metaphor", pointed out in his paper "Why Iconicity" that cross-sensory perception among human sensory organs enables the comprehension of sounds through non-auditory modalities. Puns inherently carry dual meanings — the literal meaning and the implied meaning — which are distinctly separate yet artfully interconnected. Phonetic puns utilize the phonetic "proximity" of "phoneme units" in different "symbolic units" to activate associations between their corresponding "semantic units" and establish conceptual bridges between the source and target domains. It is self-evident that sharing the same or similar sound is a prerequisite enabling the semantic correlation between dual meanings in phonetic puns.

The phonetic puns in "Hamlet" can be systematically categorized into two primary types based on their sound-meaning relationships — homophonic puns and paronomasias. And their phonetic, graphic, and semantic relationships are summarized in the table 1 below (see Wang Rongpei, Lu Xiaojuan [23], with slight modifications in this section):

Table 1: Classification of Phonetic Puns in "Hamlet"

		sound	spelling	meaning
homophonic pun	perfect homonym	same	same	different
	homophone	same	different	different
paronomasia	oronym	similar	different	different

Even though the "spelling" and "meaning" diverge, the explicit hinge and implicit hinge of phonetic puns are completely (or nearly) identical in pronunciation. Ogden and Richards' Semantic Triangle Theory [24] proposed that in the triangular relationship formed by symbols, concepts, and referents, the connection between concepts and referents, as well as between concepts and symbols, is direct. The connection between symbols and their referents is, meanwhile, arbitrary and conventional. The arbitrariness of linguistic symbols determines a significant degree of uncertainty in the relationship between symbols and referents. This leads to different linguistic symbols having different referents and meanings despite having the same or similar sound. Thus, a single phonetic form inherently triggers divergent associative networks and interpretive frameworks within the human mind. Phonetic puns utilize this property of linguistic symbols to create a semantic effect of "talking in a roundabout way".

Homophonic puns strategically employ "sound" to build a bridge between literal and implicit meanings. Through this mechanism, they facilitate Cross-domain mapping from the phonetic concept to the semantic concept. In the play, Shakespeare strategically concentrates the use of homophonic puns primarily through the protagonist — Hamlet, employing this linguistic device to vividly portray

Hamlet's enduring humiliation and bearing heavy burdens for revenge, his being sometimes insane and sometimes calm, sometimes muddled and sometimes sober, and his indecisiveness. Whenever subjected to probing inquiries, Hamlet consistently employs puns as rhetorical countermeasures — a calculated tactic of circumlocution to cleverly resolve the crisis time and time again. For example:

(1) Guildenstern: Happy in that we are not over happy; On Fortune's cap we are not the very button.

Hamlet: Nor the soles of her shoes? ("Hamlet", 2. 2, 218 - 226) [25]

(2) Hamlet: For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion, — have you a daughter?

Polonius: I have, my lord.

Hamlet: Let her not walk i' the sun ... ("Hamlet", 2. 2, 196 -199) [25]

In the first example, the homophonic pun is composed of "sole" and "soul". By exploiting the homophonic duality between "the soles of Fortune's shoes" and "the soul of Fortune", Hamlet constructs a biting satire on his friend's moral compromise in abetting villainy and spiritual corruption. The lexemes "sole" (pertaining to podiatric anatomy) and "soul" (denoting spiritual essence) originate from entirely discrete conceptual domains, meanwhile their phonetic identity (/səʊl/) facilitates projection from source domain (sole) — physicality, baseness, materiality to target domain (soul) — metaphysics, divinity, transcendence. Whereas in the second example "sun" and "son" (pronounced identically in Elizabethan English as /sʌn/) make up a pun for their homophonic relationship. Through his admonition "Let her not walk i' the sun", Hamlet covertly warns Polonius against "approaching the son", who is himself (the king's son). Sharing the same pronunciation, the connotative meaning of "sun", namely "something causing harm to people", is mapped onto that of "son", which creates a metaphorical meaning — "son" as existential threat —in this special context.

(3) Horatio: Be rul'd; you shall not go.

Hamlet: My fate cries out, And makes each petty artery in this body as hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve. Still am I call'd. Unhand me, gentlemen. By heaven! I'll make a ghost of him that lets me! ("Hamlet", 1. 4, 91 - 96) [25]

In early modern English, also Shakespearean English, "let" simultaneously meant "to encourage" and "to discourage". The two "lets" thereupon comprised a pair of perfect homonyms. While ostensibly declaring that "anyone who lets (encourages) him to track the ghost will be made a ghost, Hamlet's true intent is to warn anyone who tries to let (discourage) his mission. In this pun, Shakespeare subtly achieved his goal of making the two "lets" as a metaphor for each other with the benefit of their identical sound and spelling.

(4) Hamlet: My lord, you played once I' the university, you say?

Polonius: That did I, my lord, and was accounted a good actor.

Hamlet: What did you enact?

Polonius: I did enact Julius Caesar. I was killed I' the Capitol. Brutus killed me.

Hamlet: It was a brute part of him to kill so capital a calf there. ("Hamlet", 3. 2, 61 - 67) [25]

"Brutus" and "brute", "Capitol" and "capital" exhibit deliberate phonological parallels. While Hamlet's statements and Polonius' responses appear superficially unrelated, but the pun construer can bridge these seemingly disparate elements through observed phonological resonances between the cruel character of "Brutus" and the adjective "brute", as well as between the sacred beauty of "Capitol" and "capital".

In the construction of a phonetic pun, the source domain (Word A) is used to metaphorically represent the target domain (Word B). These two symbolic units share the same or similar sound but have distinct meanings. The sound similarity activates cognitive abilities such as association and analogy, allowing the deep meaning from the source to be mapped onto the surface meaning, thereby linking the two words across different semantic fields and producing the pun's metaphorical meaning. This mapping process can be summarized in Fig. 1:

All textual references to "Hamlet" in this study are sourced from The Arden Shakespeare edition (Renmin University of China Press, 2008).
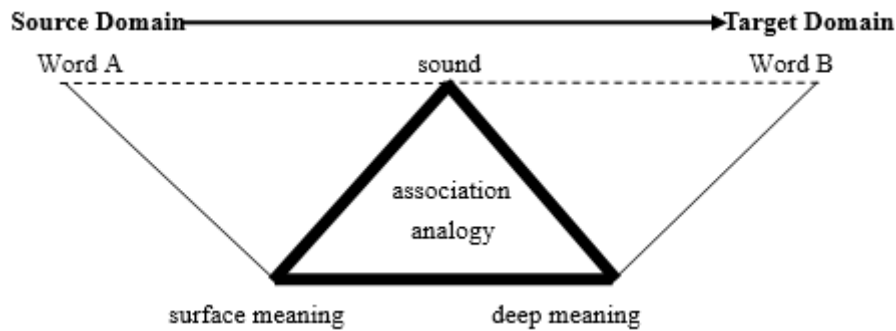
Figure 1: Mapping Method of Phonetic Pun

Homophony serves as the cognitive trigger that activates interaction, comparison, and mapping between a pun's literal and implied meanings. This demonstrates that phonetic puns are fundamentally metaphorically structured through "phonetic similarity".

3.2.2 Semantic pun

Semantic puns are puns that operate through polysemic words, where the primary meaning of a word activates its secondary meaning to establish a connection between the source domain and the target domain. As a result of changes in word meaning, the phenomenon of polysemy is universal in English. The polysemy of a word inherently satisfies the requisite that puns must have multiple meanings, and also conforms to the cognitive law of "infinite use of finite means" [26]. The diachronic development of word meanings predominantly follows two distinct yet interrelated mechanisms — concatenation and radiation [27]. Concatenation drives lexical metamorphosis through an interlinked sequence where primary meaning motivates secondary meanings, with each new meaning interrelated with and derivationally dependent on its predecessor, forming an unbroken etymological chain of logical transitions. In contrast to linear concatenation, radiation organizes lexical meaning through a dynamic hub-and-spoke structure where prototype meaning serves as cognitive anchor, with multiple derived meanings radiate independently like rays. Regardless of which process (concatenation or radiation) a word undergoes, its multiple meanings invariably maintain intrinsic connections or similarities. This inherent semantic kinship provides the essential linguistic substrate for pun construction.

The Shakespearean English existed in a dynamic transitional phase between Middle and Modern English — a period of remarkable semantic fluidity that afforded the playwright rich lexical resources for artfully crafting Hamlet's indecisive nature and his "antic disposition" through polysemous wordplay. In his pursuit of vengeance for his father's murder, Hamlet deliberately adopts a facade of madness - a performance that manifests most profoundly through his strategic use of language. His speech, accordingly, abounds with masterful examples of semantic puns in that operate through polysemic precision:

(5) *Polonius: Do you know me, my lord?*

Hamlet: Excellent well; you are a fishmonger.

Polonius: Not I, my lord.

Hamlet: Then I would you were so honest a man. ("Hamlet", 2. 2, 189 - 192) [25]

Hamlet's use of "fishmonger" adeptly avoids direct response to Polonius' probing. Literally, "fishmonger" brands Polonius a mere vendor of fish —one who employs bait to hook his catch — which seems like a madman's rambling. However, beneath its surface absurdity, "fishmonger" ostensibly denotes Polonius is a manipulator who uses bait to lure his targets. The literal and implied meanings of "fishmonger" constitute the denotative and connotative meanings of this pun, with "luring fish to hook" metaphorically referring to "luring people to hook", hence forming a mapping domain for semantic transfer.

(6) *Hamlet: ... Hum! This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries: is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? ... ("Hamlet", 5. 1, 98 - 101)* [25]

In this cemetery dialogue, Hamlet and his friend Horatio guessed the identity of the owner of each tombstone when they arrived at the cemetery. In this line, Shakespeare crafts a sophisticated wordplay

where the "recovery" operates with dual meanings, and the word "fine" unfolds across four distinct semantic layers. Hamlet took the opportunity to satirize the lawyer's motives for intentionally squeezing their clients for their recoveries rather than wholeheartedly helping the client recover the recovery of his recoveries. He questioned that no matter how many lawsuits (fines) a lawyer helps his client to file and how large profits he makes, his ultimate result (fine) is just to let his smart brain (fine pat) lie quietly in the grave filled with fine dirt. The pun construer activates the target domain based on the polysemy of "recovery", associating the meaning of "something lost and regained" with the meaning of "compensation for damages". The four meanings of the word "fine" belong to four cognitive domains, and the construer derives its extended meaning in the pun from its two primary meanings — "agreement" and "beauty".

The emergence and expansion of lexical polysemy are fundamentally driven by human metaphorical thinking. The diachronic evolution of word meanings reveals a consistent cognitive pattern: familiar concepts (Meaning A / primary meaning) are used to understand and express unfamiliar concepts (Meaning B), creating cognitive mappings between them. Under the influence of perceived similarity and analogical reasoning, aspects of the primary meaning are projected onto the extended meaning, grouping them into a related semantic category. Semantic puns operate through a meaning resonance system where explicit and implicit interpretations — though derived from the same lexical source — interact within a dual contextual framework. These interpretations maintain cognitively salient connections through analogical reasoning, allowing one context to be highlighted over the other and thereby generating the implied meaning of the pun. The mapping pathway of semantic puns can be represented in Fig. 2:
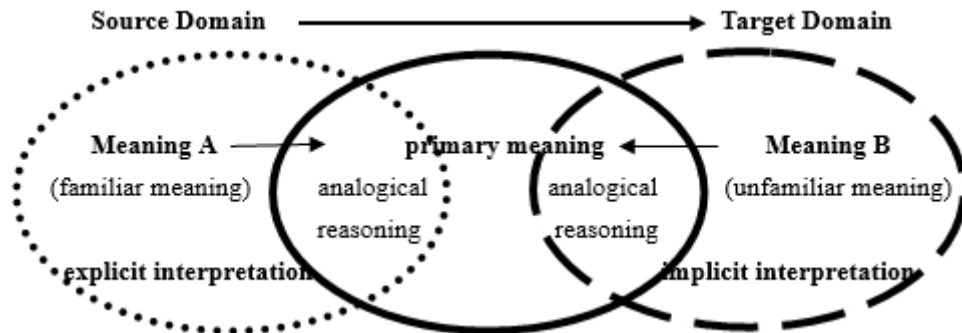

Figure 2 Mapping Method Semantic Pun

As cognitive infrastructure, metaphorical thinking operates through specific mental correspondences. The intervention of such thinking triggers associations between the dual meanings of semantic puns in dual contexts, facilitating associative projection and ultimately achieving optimal expressive effect of puns.

3.2.3 Contextual pun

Context refers to the multidimensional ecosystem in which linguistic communication occurs. Simultaneous activation of competing contextual frames is a necessary condition for the emergence of puns. Context affects the cognitive effect of puns. Contextual puns are puns that can only be established on specific contextual elements such as situational frame and co-textual web. "The sentence structure (origin domain) of puns aligns with the immediate context of verbal communication to activate a parallel cognitive domain (target domain), thereby generating another meaning" [13]. In this sense, contextual pun is a type of semantic pun activated by immediate association. Nevertheless, what distinguishes contextual puns and semantic puns is that its implicit meaning is not an inherent sense of a polysemic word, but rather a nonce meaning that is generated immediately in a specific context. This very quality renders the implied meaning of a contextual pun `latent and inaccessible without proper contextual activation, as it relies on co-textual support.

The surface structure and deep structure of puns are embedded in the explicit and implicit contexts. In verbal communication, the recipient's comprehension initiates through explicit context, thereupon stimulates and adjusts contextual assumptions based on the information obtained until appropriate contextual effects are achieved. When the recipient identifies the optimally relevant context - that is, the appropriate implicit contextual framework — a novel understanding emerges, enabling the apprehension of the pun's implied meaning. The dual context of contextual puns is specific and serves as a precise catalyst for a sentence to extend implicit meaning, whereupon the implicit meaning

achieves maximal relevance with its specific context, enabling its projection onto the literal interpretation to form a transient "polysemic domain".

Throughout the play, Hamlet often uses strategically oblique language to accuse his father's murderer. And the puns in his words often have clear directionality, specifically targeting special people and events. For example,

(7) *Guildenstern: In what, my dear lord?*

Hamlet: I am but mad north – north - west: when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw. ("Hamlet", 2. 2, 271 - 273) [25]

The term "Handsaw" explicitly refers to the heron, a small bird that likes to catch eagles. The utterance gains its full polemical power when situated within the specific dramatic context where Rosencrantz and Guildenstern deify the new king. In this social context, the pun triggers the metaphor of "handsaw", which reveals Hamlet's scathing satire on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern following the king subserviently like herons trailing hawks.

(8) *Rosencrantz: My lord, you must tell us where the body is, and go with us to the king.*

Hamlet: The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body. The king is a thing —

Guildenstern: A thing, my lord!

Hamlet: Of nothing: bring me to him. Hide fox, and all after. ("Hamlet", 4. 2, 18 - 23) [25]

When Hamlet declares "The king is a thing" to his companions, he orchestrates a calculated psychological experiment designed to test his friends' threshold for treasonous implications. When Guildenstern expressed his difficulty in parsing his statement, Hamlet further explained "nothing" — the king — is a belief, not something. Hamlet harbors deep resentment towards the new king. Accordingly in such context, the deeper meaning of "nothing" — that the king will soon become "nobody" like a dead person has been activated.

The communicative intent conveyed through puns cannot be properly decoded within a singular contextual framework — it fundamentally requires the synergistic integration of dual contexts for accurate comprehension. The crux of interpreting contextual puns lies in recognizing the contextual isomorphic patterns that bridge surface and deep meanings. Metaphorical thinking dynamically mediates the semantic mapping between instant context and subtextual signification throughout the interpretive process. The cognitive agent establishes a link between context and transient meanings through analogy, inference, and association, using instant context as a reference point, "covertly constructing a cognitive system of projection and transfer of latent discourse mechanism" [28].

3.2.4 Structural pun

Structural puns generate ambiguity due to the fuzziness of syntactic structures. This fuzziness lies in the indeterminacy of grammatical structure. In terms of linguistic form, a single word can simultaneously collocate with two words of different properties, with one being a conventional pairing and the other an obscure one. While in terms of semantics, it may carry both literal meaning and figurative meaning. Both grammatical structures are syntactically and semantically coherent yet mutually contradictory, creating conflict. In other words, this type of pun not only accommodates two grammatical structures but also involves dual meanings.

Structural puns activate implicit context by rearranging and recombining linguistic components within a sentence, transferring and projecting the literal meaning of the source domain onto the connotative meaning of the target domain. They exploit the multiple possibilities of syntactic structures, either by omitting grammatical elements or assigning new functions to them, thus forming puns—also known as grammatical puns. Most words in English have multiple meanings and serves multiple grammatical functions, meaning they do not belong to a single conceptual domain but instead encompasses multiple conceptual domains simultaneously. In cognitive processes, the syntactic structure of one conceptual domain can systematically map onto that of another, allowing the latter to be understood by analogy and reference to the former. In structural puns, the well-matched surface syntactic structure contrasts with the less compatible deep syntactic structure, thus forming the hinge of the pun and initiating the trigger of the pun.

The structural puns are the most frequently occurring type of pun in "Hamlet". They conform to Hamlet's sensitive and suspicious nature, endowing his speech with duality — allowing him to mask his true purpose of avenging his father's death under the guise of mad ramblings. For example,

(9) *Hamlet: Now, mother, what's the matter?*

Queen: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.

Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Queen: Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue.

Hamlet: Go, go, you question with a wicked tongue. ("Hamlet", 3. 4, 12 - 16) [25]

Hamlet responds to his mother's questions by repeating her mother's words. He vented his strong dissatisfaction with his mother in his answer. The phrases "Hast thy father much offended" and "have my father much offended" maintain structural symmetry, while concealing a semantic trap. When Gertrude says, "thy father," she refers to Claudius, Hamlet's stepfather, and his father's murderer; whereas Hamlet's "my father" deliberately points to his late biological father—a subtle accusation that his mother has dishonored the dead king. Similarly, the parallel structures such as "come, come" and "go, go", "with an idle tongue" and "with a wicked tongue" replicate the same grammatical patterns while embedding hidden barbs. Through this mirrored phrasing, Hamlet masks his true intent: to satirize his mother for her "wicked tongue" — a veiled critique of her morally corrosive words.

(10) *Hamlet: Ha, ha! Are you honest?*

Ophelia: My lord!

Hamlet: Are you fair?

Ophelia: What means your lordship? ("Hamlet", 3. 1, 115 -118) [25]

The syntactic pun in Hamlet's dialogue operates through a mapping from the Source Domain. The parallel structures — Structure A: "Are you honest?" (concerning *moral honesty*) and Structure B: "Are you fair?" (with its *denotation* of physical fairness) — are projected onto **Structure B: "Are you fair?"** (with its *connotation* of moral fairness). This creates a shift from the surface structure to the deep structure, leveraging the polysemy of "fair" to interrogate Ophelia's moral integrity rather than just her appearance. The mapping path of structural puns is shown in Fig. 3:
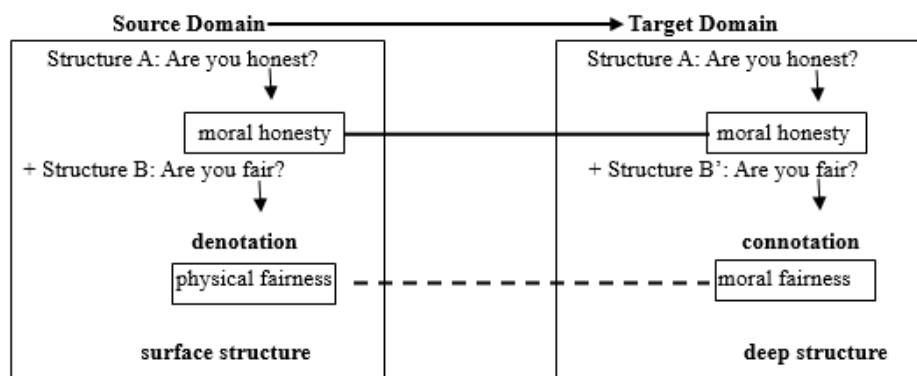

Figure 3 Mapping Method of Structural Pun

In structural puns, the surface structure (familiar, concrete vehicle) maps onto the deep structure (unfamiliar, abstract tenor) through metaphorical projection. Pun construers align these domains to decode the pun's hidden meaning.

4. The metaphorical nature of puns

Metaphor is a cognitive model grounded in the abstract similarities between distinct entities. Metaphorical thinking permeates the entire process of both constructing and deconstructing puns. During pun construction, the constructors strategically leverage the construes' metaphorical reasoning ability to "establish appropriate linguistic barriers while providing sufficient informational cues to guide the construers' inference, thereby eliciting a sense of cognitive gratification" [29]. This is achieved through a dual-context mechanism — the source domain and target domain—where their homogeneity offers the deconstructor implicit yet substantial hints. In pun deconstruction, the construers reconstruct the pun's underlying abstract conceptual domain, activating associative links between the two layers of meaning within the dual context. This is accomplished either through analogical reasoning or by

transposing the surface meaning, ultimately leading to the comprehension of the pun's true intent. Metaphorical thinking plays a pivotal role the hinting strategies of construction and the inferential processes of deconstruction.

In the realm of cognition, puns and metaphors exhibit profound similarities. Linguistically, both involve two entities and two conceptual categories. Mechanistically, puns rely on associative links between literal and underlying meanings, while metaphors operate through projections from the source domain to the target domain. Both hinge on interactive connections between conceptual domains and a pivotal "resemblance point" as a trigger, and are based on the cognitive psychological foundation of "similarity association". Structurally, both manifest the mapping between dual context, one implicit and the other explicit, maintaining self-contained logical coherence within each layer. Thus, puns and metaphors share isotopic relationships [13]. Essentially, puns constitute a form of cross-domain metaphorical reference — a cognitive process where familiar experiences scaffold the interpretation of novel ones.

5. Conclusion

Rhetoricity stands as a fundamental property of language. As an implicit rhetorical device, puns not only reflect the unique rhetorical-psychological mechanisms of rhetoric users, but also embody their cognitive-psychological mechanisms. The semantic effect of "saying one thing while meaning another" inherently involves a metaphorical mode of thinking. The cognitive process and mapping method of puns are quite complex. They employ a thought pattern where concrete, vivid concepts govern abstract, obscure concepts—an approach that converges with metaphor's cognitive mechanism of using an explicit conceptual domain to comprehend an implicit one. However, in puns, the deep structure, that is, the target domain concept, does not simply and completely replace the surface structure, namely the source domain concept in its entirety. Rather, it selectively maps some of its attributes onto the surface structure. In the light of this, the interplay of metaphorical thinking and cognition proves instrumental in elucidating the underlying cognitive principles governing puns.

Acknowledgements

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