

A Pragmatics Perspective on the White Horse Discourse: A New Interpretation

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Overview The *White Horse Discourse* (*Baimalun* 白馬論), a Classical Chinese text attributed to Long Gongsun, posits the provocative claim “a white horse is not a horse” (白馬非馬). Previous interpretations of the text have largely prioritized philosophical and prescriptive approaches often based in contemporary western philosophical theory, which preclude analysis of the claim on linguistic terms and as a context-shifting argument. I present a new ‘deictic interpretation’ of the White Horse Discourse (BML), which frames the central argument of the text as one which exploits inherent Classical Chinese polysemy and semantic ambiguity to justify an assertion that appears absurd when presented neutrally but is rendered acceptable given certain contexts.

Background Much of older literature on the BML favored the ‘abstract interpretations’, with Fung (1952) and Cheng (1987) being notable advocates. These authors argue that the BML separates ‘white’ and ‘horse’ as independent universals in accordance with a Platonic ontology, but this approach both renders the text in a foreign philosophical vocabulary and assumes that the BML presents a sincere ontological thesis, which historical evidence does not support. In addition, Cheng asserts that Chinese nouns do not distinguish between particulars and universals, but this contradicts linguistic research that demonstrates that distinction does occur, although the differentiation is pragmatic, not semantic (Li 2011). Hansen (1983) critiques the abstract interpretations in favor of the ‘mass-stuff interpretation’ but also ignores the use of context to determine meaning in Classical Chinese and assumes that the BML presents a sincere ontological thesis. Hansen (1983) interprets the nouns in the BML as specifically correlating to concrete ‘stuff’ due to the idea that Long Gongsun could not grasp linguistic ambiguity without an external linguistic frame such as English, but this ignores the fact that ambiguity can be resolved via context and Classical Chinese can make plural/singular and mass/count distinctions even without semantic markers (Robins 2000).

The Deictic Interpretation Due to the lack of plural markers and articles in Classical Chinese, the BML can be translated into a great number of permutations depending on context. The pragmatic function of 可 (*kě*) is analyzed not as an epistemic modal but as a context-sensitive operator of assertability, indicating the permissible extension of the predicate in discourse. In this reading, “white horse” and “horse” are not incompatible categories, but different indexical frames invoked within the interactional context. This interpretation of the text situates it within a broader genre of Classical Chinese paradoxes about context-dependence and deixis such as those found in the *Zhuangzi*. Additionally, semantic research into Chinese linguistic ambiguity (Zádrapa 2009) supports a polysemous and pragmatic interpretation of the text.

Significance Understanding the role that semantic and pragmatic features have in Classical Chinese texts is crucial in understanding the development of philosophical concepts and discourse that marked the era and determining the influence that the structure of the language had on Classical Chinese thought.

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