

On Pragmatic Inference and Metaphor from the Perspective of Relevance Theory*

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Abstract

Relevance theory challenges the traditional view of context, proposes the concept of cognitive context and a new inferential model. Its explanation of metaphor from the cognitive perspective is rather different from other metaphor theories. By discussing relevance theory's views on context and metaphor respectively, this paper, based on the researches of contemporary scholars and pragmatists on metaphor, aims to explore the role of pragmatic inference in metaphor comprehension and metaphor in pragmatic inference.

Key Words: Relevance Theory, Pragmatic Inference, Metaphor

1. Introduction

As a hot research topic in the field of pragmatics, pragmatic inference has been richly studied both domestically and abroad. Abroad there are Grice's conversational implication theory, Searle's indirect speech act theory, and Sperber & Wilson (1986)'s relevance theory, which are all concerned about it. Among them the most impressive one is relevance theory, whose enormous explanatory power in inferential process of utterances from the perspectives of cognition and psychology has been universally acknowledged. Many Chinese scholars have also worked on pragmatic inference from the point of view of relevance theory, such as Xu Shenghuan (2007), Zhou Jianan (1997), Xiong Xueliang (1997), Sun Yu (1993), He Ziran (2003) etc. As to the nature and working mechanism of metaphor, both cognitive linguistics

* This paper is one of the research results of the project "Study on pragmatic inference of language signs in cross-cultural communication" (0901-22) funded by Education Department of Gansu Province, PR China.

and relevance theory have contributed much to it. Some metaphor researchers, such as Tendahl & Gibbs (2008) and Zhang Hui (2005) etc, have tried to combine these two approaches together to form a more comprehensive metaphor theory. In spite of its advantages in explaining the linguistic phenomenon of metaphor, relevance theory does not figure out the specific inferential process of metaphor comprehension and the role of metaphor in inference in detail. Thus this paper will firstly make a brief summary of the studies on metaphor and pragmatic inference under the relevance model, and then discuss the role of metaphor in pragmatic inference and that of pragmatic inference in metaphor comprehension by means of examples.

2. Pragmatic inference and metaphor under the relevance model

2.1 Context and inference under the relevance model

In everyday conversation, people often do not take the time to choose their words so precisely as to capture the exact meaning intended. As a result, the role of the listener is both to take in what is said and to infer the intended meaning. To grasp the communicative intention of the speaker in the course of utterance communication, the listener has to infer what's behind the speaker's utterance, though subconsciously mostly maybe, which is usually called pragmatic inference. It seems there's a lack of information in utterance to stimulate the inferential activity, the reasons of which are various: first, limitation of language itself in expressing information; second, the economical principle of language; third, the speaker's incompetence in language using and communication (which is unintentional) and his/her use of euphemistical language (which is intentional); the listener's incompetence in comprehending, inferring and so on, in which situation, even if the utterance is informative enough, the listener may still fail to get the real meaning of the speaker. In this paper, only the first two reasons will be taken into consideration and discussed.

The informative intention of an utterance is much easier to comprehend than the communicative intention of it for the latter need more "information" and language itself is far from enough. Relevance theory is primarily about how people get implications from an utterance by inferring (deductively mostly) it in a cognitive context (He Ziran, 2006). Context is definitely something indispensable to pragmatic inference and relevance theory takes communication as a process of inferring in specific context. However, as to the definition and range of the term "context", it seems that opinions are widely divided and it is still a open question. Still relevance theory has made great progress by coming up with the notion of "cognitive context", which differs from the tradition context. Meanwhile, different scholars focus specifically on different aspects of cognitive context. Context is neither objective entity nor something pre-determined; it is something coming out of dynamic inferring process (Cai Yun, 1997). The process of inferring is to some extent for the listener to search for cognitive context, which is in relevance theory also called cognitive assumptions, including the logical information, encyclopedic knowledge, and lexical representation; it is a "psychological construct"; it is part of the assumptions about the world; it is based on the real world and more

than that as well.

The process of contextual assumption must be inferred while the inference is an intellectual enquiry process. In ostensive-inferential communicative model, the speaker shows the listener his informative and communicative intention by means of ostensive behaviors, thus providing necessary grounds of judgment for inference. Meanwhile the listener makes inference and form contextual assumptions according to the speaker's ostensive behaviors. The final aim is to reach optimal relevance and communicate successfully, that is, to get adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort. So to infer is to search relevance. The inferential mechanism of relevance theory is closely connected with the concepts of maximal relevance and cognitive context. For example, in the beginning of an American film titled *Pretty Woman*, Edward quarreled with his girlfriend on the phone and she complained: "I speak to your secretary more than I speak to you". Then Edward met his former girlfriend Susan and the following conversation is followed:

Edward: When you and I were dating, did you speak to my secretary more than you spoke to me?

Susan: She was one of my bridesmaids.

Literally Susan's answer is irrelevant with Edward's question, because Edward expects an answer which is "yes" or "no". It is obvious that Susan doesn't answer Edward's question directly. To understand the implied meaning, some relevance must be established and from what Susan has said, the following assumptions may be formed in Edward's mind:

- a. If one wants to be Susan's bridesmaid, one must be very familiar with her.
- b. Edward's secretary became Susan's bridesmaid, so she must be Susan's good friend.
- c. It is true that Susan spoke to Edward's secretary more than he spoke to her.

In this way Edward can achieve the optimal relevance and well understand what Susan means. Sperber & Wilson's ostensive and inferring model is constructed upon the mutual manifestation of communicative utterance, situation and intentions, and the final interpretation is impossible without inferring."(Xu Shenghuan, 2007: 3). It can be said that inference is the core of relevance theory. As to language communication, the communicative intention of the speaker isn't exactly encoded in literal language; nor can it be accessed through sentence phrase. Comprehending is a non-demonstrative inferential process, which can be divided into two stages: assumptions formation and testing. (Ran Yongping, 2002: 52).

2.2 Metaphor under relevance theory

The notion of conceptual mappings or projection is applied in cognitive linguistics to interpret the working mechanism of metaphor. The projection is unidirectional in conceptual metaphor theory, usually from the concrete categories to the abstract ones, being an abstract inference model. In spite of the great divergence in views on the nature and working mechanism of metaphor between relevance and cognitive linguistics, they do share their points of view in some aspect: according to Lakoff (1980), metaphor is everywhere in human language and even thoughts and daily life. Meanwhile metaphor is not taken as particularly different from daily language and is just a "loose use" of language in relevance theory. Therefore, the inferential

model under relevance theory can be adopted in metaphor interpretation.

3. The interaction between pragmatic inference and metaphor

The pragmatic inference in relevance theory is seen as a search for optimal relevance, and metaphor is considered a good way to optimize relevance and finally achieve optimal relevance, thus metaphor is sort of a tool to be applied in the course of inferring. Most metaphor theories agree with the universality of metaphor, and inference is another necessity in human communication, just as Xu Shenghuan (2007) said it makes no difference between pragmatic inference and daily language. In this sense, it is reasonable to say that metaphor may play a certain role in utterance inferring. Metaphor and metonymy are natural inference schemas. On the one hand, the easily activate mappings between the two domains within metaphor or metonymy provide a necessary bridge for pragmatic inference. The cognitive principle and communicative principle of relevance theory, on the other hand, constrain the activated mappings within metaphor or metonymy. (Zhang Hui, 2005:15). It can be concluded that there is an interactive relationship between metaphor and pragmatic inference. The following is an episode in daily life situation, which is about a bus crash.

A: So taking bus is not safe.

B: 130 is a plane, which you can take.

It can be said that B's words "130 is a plane" is a typical "A+B" metaphor. But one need to know what 130 is before to realize that it is a metaphor. 130 is actually the number of a bus, which is only known to people live in this certain district where bus N0.130 runs. This could be part of shared knowledge and mutual manifestation between A and B. Furthermore, it is known to both of them that planes are of super speed, and have wings, and so on; now that their topic is about safety, the speed aspect of a plane is naturally associated with bus N0.130. It can be inferred that B is implying that bus N0.130 is too speedy and not safe enough to take, thus "do not take it" is what he really intends to say. Enough contextual effects are achieved by metaphor in collaboration with irony.

3.1 Dynamic inferring process in metaphor interpretation

Without doubt metaphor interpretation is a process of dynamic inferring in combination with context. The inferential procedures under relevance model are to be adopted in metaphor interpretation. Cognitive context is a dynamic process of forming and testing assumptions while inferring process is cognitively ever-changing. Inferring is also a active process of associating, so is the search of optimal relevance. The conceptual mapping itself from one category to another in a metaphor is in some sense a "bridge" linking the two categories through associating and it has triggering or priming effects; it is a great way to achieve optimal relevance. What is most important, this speedy associative feature of metaphor can to some extent explain why metaphorical language can even be more easily and quickly understood than some non-metaphorical literal expressions . It can be concluded that metaphor interpretation is a dynamic associating process of high speed. Duncan ,a postgraduate of English major, in *The*

Edible Woman said, "I'll have to be a slave in the paper-mines for all time" (Atwood, 1986: 97). He said this to the heroine Marian when he was talking to her about his stresses from study. Of course it is impossible for him to be a slave, but the word can immediately remind us of the feelings of no freedom, overwork, toil etc. Combined with the word "paper-mine", Marian and readers can easily get the implications behind his words and understand the hardships in his paper writing, which is equal to a slave mining.

3.2 The bridging of metaphor for pragmatic inference

Metaphor is a cognitive tool. Metaphor is natural inference schema. New meanings can emerge from a metaphor which constructs new image schemas in the listener, which is the reason why people can easily grasp the meaning behind a metaphor. In addition to those in literature works like poetry, a great number of metaphors emerge from actual utterance communications; they bring new meanings to words. Though metaphor interpretation has to go through inferring process, it takes no more or even less time than literal words. Some metaphors, even if never heard before, can be instantly comprehended while literal words may be more time-consuming and effort-consuming to explain some abstract concepts. To keep the balance of optimal relevance, the strong contextual effects from metaphor are counterbalanced by the less cognitive effort from the listener. Thus metaphor is a great way to facilitate and accelerate the inferential process. The following is an example. Mary visited her friend Peter, only to find his apartment in a mess. When another friend asked her about Peter's place, she just said, "What a pig Peter is!" This metaphor relates the laziness and untidiness of a pig to Peter, thus it can be inferred that Peter's place is not tidy.

4. Conclusions

It is assumed that metaphor interpretation involves the same inferential process as that of daily language, which is dynamic and of high speed; as it is viewed in cognitive linguistics, metaphor is not only a rhetorical device, but also one part of the way we talk and think. What's most important, it plays a critical role in pragmatic inference in the course of utterance interpretation by helping the listener to get what's behind the literal words. However, as to the specific roles metaphor might play in actual communicative situations, more empirical studies from the perspectives of human cognition and psychology are necessary to further explore the interactive relationship between metaphor and pragmatic inference.

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