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A Contrastive Study of Interpretations of Metaphor from Pragmatic Perspective

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Abstract: Metaphor is a pervasive phenomenon, the study of metaphor is a complicated task, and the exploration of metaphor is still going on. This present paper attempts to interpret metaphor from pragmatic approaches from the perspectives of Indirect Speech Act Theory, Conversational Implicature Theory and Relevance Theory respectively, aiming at making a contrastive study of these three interpretations and finding features including similarities and differences and limitations among them.

Keywords: Metaphor; Pragmatic interpretations.

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1. Introduction

Metaphor is entirely a universal phenomenon. Consciously or unconsciously, people are speaking metaphorically almost anywhere at any time. Some linguists even claim that there is a metaphor in each of the three utterances in our daily conversation. However, the study of metaphor is by no means a new subject.

Among all the newly theories, the pragmatic and cognitive ones represent the current trend in metaphor studies. In pragmatic sense, metaphor is nothing else than characteristic of pragmatic phenomenon. From pragmatic perspective, three basic theories, i.e. Indirect Speech Act, Conversational Implicature and Relevance Theory are introduced to interpret metaphor from different perspectives.

2. Similarities

Speech Act, Conversational Implicature Theory and Relevance Theory are three fundamental theories all about verbal communication in Pragmatics. There exist some similarities between the three interpretations of metaphor with three theories.

2.1. Need to be Inferred or Calculated

Out of question, a metaphor never can be comprehensively comprehended only by its sentence meaning, or we say, literal meaning. In this sense, when metaphors are mentioned, usually, they are abnormal to some extent from their original meaning. Specifically, for the reason of possessing the connotational instead of conceptual meaning, a

process of inference should be involved for the final interpretation of metaphorical sentences. Ultimately, with some evidences hinted, the intention of the utterance can be easily caught by the hearer.

2.2. Treat Metaphor as an Implication or Intention

We cannot understand metaphor from its literal meaning. There really exists a considerable and convincing evidences indicating that people understand metaphors in much the same way as they understand literal sentences. The presenters of the three theories, [Searle \(1979\)](#), [Grice \(1978\)](#), [Sperber and Wilson \(1986/1995\)](#), hold the view that metaphorical content has the status of something implied by the utterance of the metaphor. Metaphorical interpretation is implicated by the conversational failure of the literal interpretation of the utterance.

To sum up, according to the interpretation of pragmatics, it's not too difficult for us to make the conclusion that, metaphor, as a kind of speaker's intention, is a particular conversational implicature that need to be inferred.

3. Differences

How do the three interpretations of metaphor differ from each other? In the following, generally and specifically, the differences between the three interpretations from three aspects will be analyzed.

3.1. Metaphor as Indirect Speech Act

Metaphor can be interpreted as an indirect speech act because in some contexts it represents some non-literal meanings and reflects speaker's communication intention and strategy.

According to [Searle \(1979\)](#), what the speaker means differs from what the sentence means but the first is dependent on the latter. Metaphorical meaning is not sentence meaning in that the latter is not divided into literal and metaphorical. Instead, sentence meaning is literal meaning while the speaker's meaning is metaphorical meaning. In this sense, metaphors allow the speaker to mean more than or something different from what he says. Thus the interpretation of metaphors goes beyond the knowledge of literal meaning of words and sentences. Take the following sentences 1 and 2 for example:

Example 1: He is a machine.

Example 2: He is a workaholic and always inflexible.

Comparing 1 and 2, we have no difficulty finding that there is a sense inadequacy of paraphrase no expression in 2, since there must be something lacking in the paraphrasing no matter how hard we try.

The conclusion is that if a metaphor is a description produced within a system of signification and communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, or it features a predicative structure which reflects a descriptive function, or it features a predicate which is improper and by the same token makes sense as a literal description and is essentially different from and alternative to it, the specific difference being of the same kind for both verbal and nonverbal metaphor, it is a kind of speech act.

3.2. Metaphor as Specialized Implicature

As the objective of pragmatic study is to explain how language is used to effect successful communication, conversation, as the most common and natural form of communication, has drawn the attention of many scholars.

According to the cooperative principle, ([Cooper, 1986](#)) the hearer understands the speaker's intention by way of the mutual background knowledge which, in this metaphor, results in the commonplace of the "vehicle" and "tenor". A magnet is strongly attracting, striking and tempting to something. In the same manner, she is strongly attracting, striking and tempting to men. The speaker uses a magnet to refer to a woman, flouting the first maxim of quality but he/she is exploiting the maxim and thereby conventionally implying something: she is also attracting to men. A person who says 'Children are precious gems' aims at the truth: Children are valuable and precious. The speaker does not represent himself as what he says at the superficial level, 'Children are precious gems', but only makes the utterance as if to say it by flouting a maxim of quality. It is very important to distinguish between what a speaker says from what he communicates in some other way.

By speaking 'Children are precious gems', the speaker wants to express that children are treasures. Every metaphorical proposition is the metaphor flouting the first maxim of quality. This is not to say or imply that the point of a metaphor (what a speaker intends to communicate) is false. On the contrary, the point of a metaphor is typically true. Further, the point of a metaphor is conventionally implied in virtue of the fact that the speaker flouts the first maxim of quality.

Example 3: John is a pig, although he is not dirty.

The metaphorical interpretation of this sentence is not really cancelled at all: It merely indicates that dirtiness is not the right paraphrase, and that we must look for other metaphorical interpretation in order to make sense of the utterance.

So interpretation of metaphor relies on both the theory of pragmatics and psychology.

3.3. Metaphor as Optimal Relevance

Relevance is defined as the function of cognitive effects and processing effort, it is also said that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance. The optimal interpretive expression of a thought should be the hearer information, which is relevant enough to be worth processing, and should require as little

processing effort as possible. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986/1995), “metaphors are a type of indirectness argument”.

Take “My love is a red, red rose” for example, we use familiar, concrete concept “rose” to refer to the unfamiliar, abstract concept “love”, and thus we can understand “love” with less effort by using this metaphors than defining it literally. As we can understand “love” more easily and fully, thus we can achieve the greatest contextual effect.

Though relevance theory has been employed to explain many linguistic problems, in fact, like any other theory, it also remains some defects, especially some existing problems in application, which will be mainly reduced to three points as follows: Firstly, the notion of relevance is too general; secondly, relevance theory overemphasizes the creativity of the communicators; thirdly, it treats the communication in a too mechanical way.

Though there are some controversies about relevance theory, this does not diminish the significance of it as a whole. It has proved to be a very powerful theory, which can account for a wide range of linguistic and cognitive problems. But as a new framework, relevance theory needs us to develop it further and test its application value with more linguistic data. It is surely to have a promising future in the field of cognitive pragmatics.

4. Limitations

Some limitations or constraints, which consist of inner and outer weaknesses, on pragmatic interpretations metaphor should be mentioned.

Firstly, its study of metaphor still originates from the point of linguistic view, which does not touch the real nature of metaphor. Metaphor is not a simple phenomenon of language, but a way of conceptualizing our cognition of the world. Metaphor exists not only in the specific discourse but also in the conceptual system, which constructs and determines our way of thinking and our perceiving of the world.

Secondly, one metaphorical utterance may be interpreted variously in a certain circumstance, so, the hearer may infer differently according as how he comprehends the speaker’s literal utterance. Observing Searle’s principles, sometimes even if we can work out R, we still cannot get a definite utterance meaning of “S is P.” For example, in “Juliet is the sun.” the property that is attributed to “Juliet” is of a different kind than the properties that apply to “the sun” So since the day Shakespeare produced this controversial metaphor, a wide variety of paraphrases of “Juliet is the sun.” have aroused interest in both literal and linguistic aspects. Following the eight principles proposed by Searle, though we can understand S in terms of R similar to P, in what way the speaker and the listener can reach the same utterance meaning is not explained in his theory.

Thirdly, the traditional distinction of literal-figurative meanings is completely destroyed and severely criticized by conceptual metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Given that distinction, one might think that one reaches a metaphorical interpretation of a sentence by starting from the literal meaning and applying some algorithmic process to its understanding. There do exist situations in which some rules apply to the understanding of metaphor, but in general this is not how metaphor cognitively works.

However, besides some inner factors of limitations, some outer factors should not be inevitable, cultural, social factors and context influences are the most important focus. Since language develops in social and cultural context; its use is governed by society rather than by the individual. The creation and the use of language depend on the specific culture, which requires study on a language should be put in the cultural context. So, metaphor is not only a linguistic concern, but also a socio-cultural phenomenon.

5. Conclusion

The present study is a contrastive study which aims at analyzing the features and limitations between the three interpretations of metaphor from the perspectives of Speech Act Theory, Conversational Implicature Theory and Relevance Theory. It proves the fact that although the last one, compared with the two formers, is a more powerful theory in the metaphor interpretation, it is incomplete and need to be studied and discussed further. In this paper, we focus our attention on two major findings about that.

Firstly, the features of three theories interpretation of metaphor own its similarities and differences from different views of pragmatics. By such a contrastive study, we have found that, all of three interpretations treat metaphor as a kind of speaker’s intention and hold the idea that the comprehensive process of metaphorical utterances is a process of inferring. For the same reasons, there are some differences.

Secondly, some inner and outer limitations should be mentioned in the interpretations of metaphor. For the former one, metaphor understanding is a complex process, any single one theory or interpretation could not interpret this linguistic phenomenon effectively and completely, which leads to some weaknesses of pragmatic angle. Simultaneously, as an important part of pragmatic study, outer factors, namely cultural, social and contextual, are significantly essential in the interpretation of metaphor. Metaphor can be identified and brought into full play in different linguistic context. Metaphor is also a part of culture and the reflection of society. So the same metaphor might render different interpretations in different countries with different cultural backgrounds.

To sum up, by such a contrastive study, we can see that the interpretation with Relevance Theory is a creative attempt to study metaphor from cognitive point of view and Relevance Theory has more powerful explanatory force than the Speech Act theory and Grice’s theory. However, the appearance of metaphor at the first sight is the phenomena of language, and language originates from human cognitive ability. In this sense, metaphor is also an

important cognitive mode. The applications and interpretation of metaphors are actually the reflection of human creative thinking ability. Therefore, the author suggests that metaphors be further studied alongside with the cognitive approach and from a cognitive perspective.

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