The Analysis of Conversational Implicature from Violation of Politeness Principle in Big Bang Theory

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Abstract. The impolite language and conversational implicature produced by the violation of the politeness principle are gradually becoming common, which can sometimes achieve unexpected effects. This study selects the dialogue segments between main characters in Big Bang Theory to make text analysis, which aims to analyze reasons and contexts of intended violation, contents as well as effects of the conversational implicature. The results indicate that the contradiction of the politeness principle itself may cause impolite behavior and people often make use of the conversational implicature produced by deliberate violation of politeness principles to create a humorous atmosphere or achieve their real communicative intentions.

Introduction

Leech’s politeness principle is considered as the most important theory in certain conversational situation, which includes Tact maxim, Generosity maxim, Approbation maxim, Modesty maxim, Agreement maxim and Sympathy maxim. According to Leech [1], they are right rules that all people seem to obey. The PP can be formulated as: “minimize the expression of impolite beliefs; maximize the expression of polite beliefs” [2]. But in some situations, it is found that people’ indirect intention will only be made clear when explained by intended violation of politeness principle. It can be said that Leech’s politeness principle is just an ideal situation which can help people maintain a harmonious relationship. And people cannot observe the PP in the real communication and conflicts are inevitable. What’s more, some seemingly polite utterance also violate the Politeness principle [3]. Politeness principle can explain why people deliberately violate the cooperative principle in verbal communication, so its maxims can rescue the cooperative principle [4].

Conversational Implicature from Violation of Politeness Principle

Causes of Violation

The first reason is the need to achieve ideal communicative purpose. Through flouting the PP and meeting the requirement of CP, people can exchange useful information efficiently in a direct way. For example, from the perspective of pragmatics, the teacher’s criticism to the students is a kind of impolite speech act, which of course, violates the principle of politeness, because criticism means negation and accusation. However, teachers’ rational criticism can arouse students’ positive inner experience and make them generate positive emotional fluctuations, and invest more energy in learning. The second one is People’s different recognition to the same expression. Even in the same context, people may use different communicative language because of different cognition, reasoning, judgement as well as different state of mind. For example, when the teacher comes into the classroom and says: “It is so cold”, students will have psychological activity after hearing this sentence: “what does the teacher mean? Do I have to close the window? ” There are different interpretations of conversational implicature of this sentence for different people.

The teacher (speaker): It is so cold. So the possible conversational implicatures are:
A. Please close the window.
B. Please turn on the heating installation.
C. The teacher greets his students before the class.
D. The teacher makes attempt to alive the atmosphere.
E. The teacher wants to drink some hot water.

According to the requirement of PP, students (hearer) are supposed to make some reactions as follows:

Firstly, to agree with the teacher and say: “It’s true. It’s really cold”. It seems to be more polite if students accomplish the action of closing the window or turning on the heating installation.

Secondly, to respond to the greeting of teacher or communicate with their teacher enthusiastically.

However, it is just an ideal situation. It is often the case that students will violate the PP when they don’t understand teacher’s real intention and just respond according to their own feelings, which may be “it is not cold at all”. After all, two parties in communication have different perceptions experiences, psychological environments social status, and conversational intentions, which will lead to different understandings of related contexts.

The last cause is the conflicts between different maxims. The third cause is that the six maxims have conflicts and cannot completely observed when three parties are involved, that is to say, there are two speakers Sheldon and Penny, a hearer Mike, who is present when they are talking.

Example 1:
Sheldon: Mike is a little stupid.
Penny: I think so.

In such a situation, according to agreement maxim, Penny should maximize agreement with Sheldon and minimize disagreement, so it is a better choice to agree with Sheldon’s opinion out of politeness. However, from the aspect of approbation, Penny should maximize praise to Mike and minimize disparage to him. Therefore, her reply “I think so” is impolite and rude to Mike. Sometimes, speakers may drop into a dilemma. When they meet the need of agreement maxim, they must violate the approbation maxim, but which maxim they choose to violate depends on themselves.

**Contexts of Violation**

There is no denying the fact that people sometimes have the need of violating the maxims of PP to achieve his purpose and express his real intention in some certain context. The author will list several contexts as follows:

The first context is that the speaker needs to construct identity through intentional impolite speech [5], which expresses the opposition between the two sides of the communication and reflects the alienation of the social relationship deliberately to achieve the ideal social purpose. And when the social inter-relationship that exists between the speaker and listener is not equal, impoliteness is more inclined to appear.[6] The communicative subject in a strong position expresses his dominant identity through impolite speech to achieve a certain communicative purpose. In other word, the speaker will construct his dominant identity and hopes that the listener can succumb to his communicative needs, which is realized by command, criticism, blame, reprimand, or indifference and arrogance that deliberately broaden the distance from the listener.

Example 2:
Sheldon: I wouldn’t object to no longer charactering you as “not my girlfriend”.
Amy: Interesting. Now try it without the quadruple negative.
Sheldon: You are being impossible
Amy: Hi, Stuart.
Sheldon: Fine, will you be my girlfriend?
Amy: Yes.
Sheldon: That is enough of that. Here is a dollar for your trouble. (Sheldon spoke to Stuart)

It can be seen that although Sheldon and Amy fall in love with each other, their dialogue is not harmonious. Shelton’s tone is full of arrogance, annoyance, and indifference because he wants to construct a dominant identity to express that he can’t accept that Amy becomes the girlfriend of
Stewart. Impoliteness is a means of speech [7], Sheldon uses impolite speeches to construct strong identity to indirectly express his jealousy.

In the interpersonal communication, doctors and teachers also often violate the principle of politeness to build a strong identity and establish prestige [8]. Only by violating the politeness principle, can teachers correct students errors in time and effectively, and doctors avoid mistakes.

The second context is any humorous atmosphere, in which the speaker and the hearer are usually in a close social relation.

Example 3:
Howard: Sheldon, you’re wrong. Wolverine was not born with bone claws.
Sheldon: Howard, you know me to be a very smart man. Don’t you think if I were wrong, I’d know it?
Howard: Ok, first of all, give it up. You are arguing with a crazy person.
Sheldon: I am not crazy. My mother had me tested.

There is an argument which happens between Sheldon and Howard. Obviously, the words between them are impolite. Even though they are good friends, both Sheldon and Howard don’t want to lose any benefit from themselves. Sometimes impolite speech is more like a trick or a joke, which will create lots of humor in the communication without any risk which will affect harmonious interpersonal relationship. The impoliteness which is negative originally is positive in Big Bang Theory.

Conversational Implicature of Violation

The generating process of conversational implicature can be called “logical pragmatics mode” [9], which assumes that speaker observes the cooperative principle and the hearer will deduce what is implicated from what is said. In order to work out the conversational implicature of an utterance, one needs to know its conventional meaning and the context in which it is used” [10].

The first one is violation of tact and generosity maxim. Tact maxim takes the most important role in polite communication behavior [11]. The tact maxim requires the speaker show respect to others and be polite to the hearer. The greater the cost an act is to the hearer, the more polite the speaker ought to try to make the utterance. The generosity maxim requires the speaker to put the other party in the first place in conversation. The conversational implicature can only arise when people flout the maxims of politeness principle.

Example 4:
Sheldon: Thank you for driving me to work.
Leonard: You know this is my day off, Sheldon.
Sheldon: Oh, good. I am not keeping you from nothing.

In this dialogue, it can be known that this is a holiday for Leonard, and it is sad that he must take his rest time to drive Sheldon to work. However, Sheldon’s response is that he doesn’t interfere with Leonard nothing. According to tact and generosity maxim, Sheldon should let Leonard get more benefit but he puts himself in the first place without more thanks. And for audience, it produces an unexpected humorous effect in this communication.

The second is violation of approbation and modesty maxim. Approbation maxim also seems to be more important than modesty maxim, which shows people that the focus of politeness principle is put on others rather than on self [12]. In order to have a successful and smooth conversation, people should use more praises and less dispraise. But people usually violate them. Below is a conversation between the son-in-law and the father-in-law.

Example 5:
Mike: I will teach you how to use it.
Howard: Really? Thank you, sir.
Mike: Call me Mike.
Howard: We are just married to a couple of ballbusters, Mike?
Mike: That is my wife and daughter you are talking about.
Howard: Great couples of gals.
Mike: I would not go that far.

This is often the case that people should address others respectfully, especially when they talk with the elder. But even though Mike is father-in-law of Howard, Mike encourages Howard to call his name directly, and Howard also does as required. Apparently, Howard violates the maxim, whose conversational implicature is that Mike wants Howard to reduce his nervousness and increase intimacy between them. When Howard says “a couple of ballbusters” and Mike replied “this is my wife and daughter”, Howard realizes that he violates the politeness principle. So he tries to save Mike’s face by saying “great couples of gals”, which is an excessive compliant that makes Mike uncomfortable. It indicates that politeness has different degrees. Too little or too much approbation can be all considered to be impolite.

The speaker of the sentence “I think I am the most beautiful girl in the world” boasts that she is very beautiful, which violates the modesty maxim. In traditional view of people, self-flattering is improper, so violation of this kind of maxim is rare in our daily life, unless the speaker aims to add some humorous effects.

The third is violation of agreement and sympathy maxim. The agreement maxim requires speakers maximize agreement and minimize disagreement. The sympathy maxim requires speaker minimize antipathy and maximize sympathy. However, in Big Bang Theory, disagreement and antipathy will also appear.

Example 6:
Sheldon: I’m sick and I want soup.
Penny: Why didn’t you just have soup at home?
Sheldon: Penny, I have an IQ of 187. Don’t you imagine that if there were a way for me to have had a soup at home, I would have thought of it?
Penny: You can have soup delivered.
Sheldon: I didn’t think of that.

In this example, Sheldon has a fever and he wants a soup, so he comes to the hotel where Penny works and bothers her normal work. Their opinions are different as to whether Sheldon should have a soup at home or not. They both violate the agreement maxim and don’t agree with the hearer’s opinion, from which the audience can get a great deal of fun.

Example 7:
Sheldon: You just lie to Penny.
Leonard: Yes, I did.
Sheldon: I am uncomfortable having been included in your lie to Penny.
Leonard: What was I supposed to say?
Sheldon: You could have told her the truth.
Leonard: That would have hurt her feelings.
Sheldon: Is that a relevant factor?

Penny is eager to become a singer but she isn’t good at singing. Leonard, Penny’s boyfriend, tells a white lie to her but Sheldon can’t accept it. Sheldon’s utterance, which violates sympathy maxim, can reflect that even though Sheldon has a very high IQ, he is foolish and awkward in interpersonal communication. The fullness image of Sheldon is highlighted and the strong contrast makes the audience can’t help laughing.

When it comes to the effect of violation, people may violate the politeness principle because their basic goal is to transfer unknown contents or information to others or to achieve particular communication effects. If they don’t violate the PP, their communication will become meaningless. If doctors blindly respect the politeness principle and hide the patient’s condition, they may pose a life threat to the patient. Teachers will also become irresponsible and their students cannot find their own shortcomings. It’s also unnecessary to observe the PP too strictly between familiar people. Violating the PP can create humorous or relaxing atmosphere and increase intimacy between people. All in all, reasonable violation can help people achieve their real communication goals better. And as is known, politeness principle and cooperative principle are complementary to each other and their operation is a fluctuant process. If people violate the PP, they will observe the CP better, which
requires us to give more enough useful information in a direct way. There is no doubt that proper violation of the PP can improve our comprehensive communication skills and avoid unnecessary misunderstandings by comprehending others’ violation.

Conclusion
This paper mainly analyses the conversational implicature produced by the violation of the politeness principle by listing several possible contexts and adopting many examples in daily life. It also attempts to find out reasons and contexts of intended violation as well as effects of the conversational implicature.

The violation of the politeness principle plays an important role in expressing speaker’s real intention and achieving basic goals of their communication. Moreover, the deep understanding of other people’s intended violation of the politeness principle can help people to reduce conflicts as well as misunderstandings and improve their comprehensive language skills.

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