An Influence of Pragmatic Triangle Model on English Grammar Teaching

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Abstract. The paper is a tentative endeavor to synthesize the merits and to make up for the deficiencies of the achievement in the study of English grammar teaching on ambiguity, with a focus on pragmatic ambiguity and its application for interpretation in cognitive framework. Meanwhile, it is hoped that more and more scholars and researchers have a clear understanding of the pragmatic triangle model so as to illustrate the mysterious language phenomena. PTM is more influential and powerful while being applied to explain and interpret pragmatic ambiguity, which can be concluded as follows. PTM puts more emphasis on the dynamic blending construction in human mind and focuses on showing up the hidden complexities involved in cognitive perception.

The Theoretic Basis of Pragmatic Triangle Model (PTM)

Referential theory: Referential theory is the theory of meaning which relates the meaning of a word to the thing it refers to or stands for. It is generally possible to explain the meaning of a word by pointing to the thing it refers to [1]. So the referential theory refers to the relations among concept, words and things. Ogden and Richards [2] in their book \textit{The meaning of meaning} proposed the semantic triangle. They argue that the relation between a word and a thing it refers to is not direct. It is mediated by concept. They see the relationship between words and things as a triangle. The ‘symbol’ is of course the linguistic element—the word, the sentence, etc., and the ‘referent’, the object, etc., in the world of experience, while thought or reference is concept.

![Figure 1. Ogden & Richards’ semantic model.](image)

Lyons[3] says that “the relationship which holds between words and things is the relationship of reference: words refer to things.” The reference that appears in the discourse should be definite, and it should be used to refer to only one word or phrase. Otherwise ambiguity will occur.

Kurtz’s formula: The formula “y=F(x+k)” was put forward by Kurtz, Gentner & Gunn in 1999[4]. According to them, ‘x’ refers to given information; ‘k’ represents some individual experiences and cyclopaedic knowledge that have been stored in memory; ‘F’ is the general processes of many calculating methods such as deduction and induction; ‘y’ represents the result of deducing which shows estimation, conclusion and prediction. Therefore the process of the inference is that the listener will deduce and infer in the verbal communication with the given information ‘x’ and the cyclopaedic knowledge ‘k’ and s/he will make a choice as to which one is the correct meaning to achieve the communication. Then the result of inference is ‘y’ which is also the conclusion of the inference. As a result, Jiang Yong holds that we can employ this formula for the process of pragmatic
inference, in which ‘x’ represents the information of the explicit input whose function is to show directly or indirectly partial information of conceptual structure that the speaker wants to transmit and to activate the context assumption; ‘F’ is the general name of calculations to be used to integrate and rebuild information and to exchange the input information; ‘k’ refers to the context assumption done by cognitors and represents the information of the implicit input, whose function is to make the meaning and interpretation more flexible; ‘y’ is a blending space to accept and integrate the concept projection from implicit input and explicit input[4]. It is shown in the figure below:

![Figure 2. Jiang Yong’s pragmatic triangle model.[4]](image)

Conceptual integration theory (CIT): Conceptual integration theory, developed by Fauconnier[5], and Fauconnier & Turner[6], is a general cognitive process used to construct meaning which is dynamic, supple and active in the moment of thinking. As a result of interacting with other general cognitive processes, CIT yields products that frequently become entrenched in conceptual structure and grammar and often performs new blending on its entrenched products. It is easy to detect in spectacular cases but it is for the most part a routine, workday process that escapes detection except on the technical analysis so as to play a fundamental role in the construction of meaning in everyday life, in the arts and sciences, in technological development and in religious thinking. The essence of the operation is to construct a partial match between input mental spaces and to project selectively from those inputs into a novel ‘blended’ mental space, which then dynamically develops emergent structure. It operates on two input mental spaces to yield a third space, the blend. The blend inherits partial structure from the input spaces and has emergent structure of its own. However, CIT’s mainly shortcoming lies in that it never discusses conceptual blending in the view of speech communication so that it neglects the influence on conceptual cross-space projection and integration made by the speaker’s context assumption. It does not take the context assumption into consideration[4].

Relevance theory (RT): Relevance theory (RT), presented by Sperber and Wilson in their monograph Relevance: Communication and Cognition, was originally triggered by Gricean Pragmatics but developed in a different way and was thought to have laid a theoretic foundation for a new interdisciplinary—Cognitive Pragmatics. It is an inferential theory, the basic ideas of which are contained in the definition of relevance and two principles. [7] This theory mainly deals with pragmatic problems from the cognitive theoretic perspective that has been prevailing over and penetrating into many academic fields. In relevance-theoretical realm, several important notions are involved to explain relations between utterance and context in communication. However, RT fails to present processes and steps of the on-line inference in a specific way. RT cannot provide a concrete programme of the conceptual cross-space blending process.

The Influence of PTM on English Grammar Teaching

Traditional interpretation of grammar teaching: For a long time, many linguists and scholars have been trying all kinds of theories and models to analyze pragmatic ambiguity, interpreting it from different angles. These explorations on ambiguity have also done much on revealing the nature
and the mystery of language. Interpretation of pragmatic ambiguity becomes more difficult in that the communication is dynamic and pragmatic ambiguity has the features of uncertainty, vagueness and indirectness. According to Chengdong Xiang, there are mainly five factors to influence understanding of pragmatic ambiguity that are the context, the individual’s cognitive schema, the mutual knowledge of the communicators, the clarity of an utterance and the restrict of the topic. [9]

In the process of communication, communicators keep adjusting their own cognitive contexts in order to find mutually manifest information. Then they could conclude the communicative intention and make sure that the communication can go on smoothly. But sometimes, the information of cognitive context stored in the memory is not sufficient or the information about some circumstance is vacant. During the communication, communicators cannot activate relevant information or cannot activate relevant information adequately. That will cause ambiguity in comprehension of utterances, which even may lead to the failure of the communication. For example,

A: Will you have some coffee?
B: Coffee would keep me awake.

In this conversation, B’s answer is ambiguous, from which two interpretations can be derived.

a. B: Ok. I’d love some. (Then I can recover my energy to do my work.)
b. B: No. I want to have a sound sleep.

It is up to B’s habits. So if A is familiar with B’s habits or living manners, that is, A has stored relevant information in his cognitive context, it will be easy for A to obtain the shared cognitive context with B and gain the communicative intention. Otherwise, there will be no information manifest to both of them. Ambiguity will block the continuation of communication.

Therefore, the lack of information in cognitive context will make communicators fail in mutual manifestness. Since there is no information manifest to each other, the communicators could not get any feedback from the cognitive context to help draw the comprehension. Thus the communicative intention may be mapped into the target cognitive domain in multiple ways. The multiplicity of intention presented in mind will produce more than one interpretation, which can arouse ambiguity.

PTM’s influence of pragmatic ambiguity in English teaching. As a phenomenon of language, pragmatic ambiguity must have its cognitive causes of generation, which are more essential than other factors. Cognitive study can help people attain not only a better understanding of how language works in people’s mind, but also a better understanding of how people know the world around. Cognition possesses a functional value. It starts with the input of sensory information. Incoming sensory information is held in a literal or unanalyzed stated in the incoming pattern. The identified information, if relevant to the current activity, is held temporary in working memory. As new information enters working memory, some together with old information is reorganized into large units, some information is listed, and still some information is sent to permanent memory. That provides a general framework for understanding how people encode, store and retrieve information, and how language processing occurs. The study on pragmatic ambiguity from the perspective of cognition is not only to understand what pragmatic ambiguity is, but also to explore the universal in the course of the generation, acquisition and comprehension of language and to study the knowledge models of language concerning mind and memory. In fact, language knowledge is the conceptualization of the world knowledge.

However, Fauconnier and Turner[8] divide semantic integration into three forms—composition, elaboration and completion. Each form then gives possibility to the occurrence of new conceptual structure. For example,

A: I’m out of petrol.
B: There is a garage round the corner.

In this dialogue, the literary meaning of the two sentences is irrelevant with each other. But when A says “I’m out of petrol.”, B can have at least two ways of interpretation. First of all, when A says “I’m out of petrol.” which becomes a stimulus and an explicit input, B’s mind begins to interpret and will activate context assumption to inference that the garage is not only round the corner, but also
will be open and sell petrol. In addition, B may find out with his or her knowledge that garages sell petrol, and “round the corner” is not a great distance away, which become the implicit input in the frame of PTM. Furthermore, B will inference that A’s remark is not only as a description of a particular state of affairs, but also as a request for help. As a result, B answers “there is a garage” and the communication goes successfully and smoothly. However, if B cannot activate context assumption or use relevance theory, B will not answer in this way “there is a garage” so that the communication fails. Then pragmatic ambiguity happens.

**Conclusion**

All in all, the influence of PTM on English teaching, especially on the elimination of the ambiguity is useful and active, but it is a hard job that has not been solved after many years of working on it, and even it is solved, it will just be a small step towards the desired cognitive goal of being able to extract information from natural language. Since it is rare that an utterance in daily use conveys exactly its literal meaning, pragmatic ambiguity remains a major subject of any language comprehension study in English teaching. What’s more, the future study on pragmatic triangle model should be the interdisciplinary research by developing a process in which the results of different approaches may be integrated.

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**References**


