An Analysis of Hamlet's Insanity: A Relevance Theory Perspective

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Abstract. Hamlet’s insanity is a controversial topic which scholars have debated about for centuries. This thesis makes a tentative application of the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson in the interpretation of Hamlet’s insanity in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Relevance Theory is the foundation of cognitive-pragmatics. A multi-level cognitive-pragmatic analysis of the cognitive environment of the characters and the relevance of the characters’ verbal communication helps to reveal the inner thoughts of the characters and unfold the artistry of Shakespeare’s language, which Hamlet verifies that Hamlet just feigned insanity and also proves the applicability of Relevance Theory in the analysis of dramatic language.

Introduction

In 1986, Sperber and Wilson opened the door into a new world of communication. They proposed that human attention and thought automatically turn toward information which seems relevant to them. To communicate is to claim someone’s attention; hence to communicate is to imply that the information communicated is relevant. They stated that in the human communication process for the communicators, communication is an ostensive behavior in which communications show their informative intention and communicative intention with language signs; while for the addressees, communication is an inferential process, in which addressees try to infer the communicators’ intentions through contextualizing the language with relevance.

Relevance Theory

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson’s Relevance Theory is an important approach in pragmatics. It is proposed in one of their famous book Relevance: Cognition and Communication, which was firstly published in 1986 and republished in 1995, 1998 and 2001. It has various theoretical resources, combining contemporary cognitive science, linguistics, philosophy and behavioral science of human beings and attempts to answer not only philosophical question about the nature of communication, but also psychological questions about how the interpretation process unfolds in the addressee’s mind. This theory presents a new approach to human communication and utterance based on a general view of cognition. According to Sperber and Wilson, the extent of relevance is related to the contextual effects of an utterance and the efforts used to process the utterance. Contextual effects, however, could not be achieved randomly. In other words, even when some processing efforts are made, no one can ensure that those efforts have enough contextual effects. Whether the processing efforts of an utterance could have some contextual effects depends on the complicity of the utterance and the efforts used to get enough contextual effects in the specific context. Other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effects are achieved by processing an input, the greater its relevance is. However, the processing of the input, and the derivation of these effects, involves mental efforts. Other things being equal, the smaller the processing efforts are required, the greater the relevance is. In sum, the greater the cognitive effects are, the greater the relevance is; the smaller the processing effort is used, the greater the relevance is. To be more precise and specific, two conditions are added to complement the definition. “An assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.” and “an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context
is small.” (Sperber & Wilson, 2001:125). From the definition above we can conclude that firstly, relevance is determined by two factors, cognitive effect and processing effort; secondly, both of the two factors are context-dependent, so the notion of relevance itself is context-dependent; thirdly, other things being equal, the greater the cognitive effect achieved by processing a new assumption, the greater the relevance; other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort required in the processing of new assumption and the derivation of the cognitive effect, the greater the relevance.

**Cognitive Environment**

All humans live in the same physical world. We are all engaged in a lifetime’s enterprise of deriving information from this common environment and constructing the best possible mental representation of it. The representations are commonly described as “cognitive environment” (Sperber & Wilson, 2001:38). Cognitive environment of an individual was defined as a set of assumptions that are manifest to an individual. The assumption is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at that time of representing it mentally and accepting the representation as true or probably true. To be manifest is to be perceptible or inferable. Actually, the cognition is composed of such a variety of information perceived from the physical environment and that is restricted from the memory. In the memory, a large pool of information stores, including the information derived from the previous utterances, the cultural or other knowledge stored and the further information inferred from these two sources. Generally speaking, the cognitive environment is mainly composed of three kinds of information which is the logical information, the encyclopedic information and the lexical information. Logical information consists of a set of deductive rules which are applied to sets of premises in which that concept occurs. Encyclopedic information refers to the information about the extension and denotation of a concept, that’s about the objects, events or properties that represent it. Lexical information refers to the word or phrase of the natural language which is used to express the concept.

**Contextual Effect**

According to relevance theory, human cognition is relevance oriented. People only pay attention to information which is relevant to them. Relevance is defined in terms of contextual effect and processing effort. The notion of contextual effect is essential to the characterization of relevance. “An assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effect in that context.” (Sperber & Wilson, 2001:122). When new information interacts with the existing assumptions, contextual effects can be achieved. There are three kinds of relations between the new information and the previous existing assumptions (old information) that can yield contextual effects thus making the utterances to be relevant. These are as follows: (1) Strengthen (provide more evidence for) existing assumptions; (2) Contradict and eliminate (provide decisive evidence against) existing assumption; (3) Combine with existing assumption to yield contextual implication and conclusions derivable from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone.

**Optimal Relevance**

It seems that human communication is determined by the desire for optimization of resources, and one aspect of optimization is to keep the effort spent to a minimum. Communication is achieved by “interpreting evidence” (Yuanlong Lin, 2007). Applied to contextual selection, this means that addressees will naturally start out with those most easily accessible contextual assumptions that will involve little processing effort of supplying. The other aspects of optimization are obtaining benefits. That is to say, addressees expect that the effort spent in comprehension will in some way modify the contextual assumptions they brought to the communication act. Contextual modification is referred to as contextual effect in relevance theory, which presents itself in the form of an erasure of some assumption in the context, a modification of the strength of some assumptions.
in the context, or the derivation of contextual implications. The fundamental assumption of relevance theory is that every aspect for human communication and cognition is governed by the search for relevance. Every utterance starts out as a request for the addressee’s attention and addresses only pay attention to information that seems relevant to them. As a result, every act of overt communication creates and expectation of relevance. The fundamental idea that communicated information comes with a guarantee of relevance is called the principle of relevance by Sperber and Wilson and defined as follows: “Every act of ostensive communication communicates the presumption of its own optimal relevance.” (Sperber & Wilson, 2001:158). According to this principle, whenever a person sets out to communicate something, he automatically communicate the presumption that what he is going to say is believed to be optimally relevant to us. Thus it can be seen that the goal of human communication is optimal relevance, that is, an expectation on the part of the audience that his attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effect at minimal processing cost. To put it more clearly, an utterance, on a given interpretation is optimally relevant if and only if: (a) it achieves contextual effects to be worth the addressee’s attention; (b) it puts the addressee to no unjustifiable expenditures of processing effort in achieving those effects.

The Introduction of Hamlet

Hamlet is considered the summit of Shakespeare’s art. The story comes from an old Danish legend. The action of the play is laid in Denmark. Gertrude, queen of Denmark, becomes the widow after the sudden death of the king and marries the late king’s brother Claudius who thus becomes the new king. Prince Hamlet, son of the late king, returns home from the University of Wittenberg. Then his father’s ghost appears to him at the castle of Elsinore, Hamlet pretends to go insane. However, his insanity is taken by Polonius, an old courtier, to be an emotional disturbance due to his passion for Ophelia, daughter of Polonius. At this moment, a company of players visits the castle, and Hamlet has a play acted, which resembles the late king’s murder. When the scene of murder of the king revives on the stage, Claudius starts up in fear before the play ends, and goes out. Gertrude sends Hamlet to her chamber, where he reveals Claudius’ baseness and expresses his indignation at her hasty marriage, which renders the queen heart-broken. Then Hamlet becomes aware that he is being overheard in the conversation. Thinking it is Claudius that is in hiding, he runs his sword through the arras but finds the eavesdropper thus killed to be Polonius. It is a perfect opportunity for Claudius to get rid of Hamlet. He sends Hamlet to England, intending to have him killed there. But on his way to that country, he is captured by pirates who send him back to Denmark again. Heart-broken at the death of his father, poor Ophelia goes insane and then is drowned in a stream. Hamlet returns just at the time of her funeral. In the grave-yard he has a quarrel with Laertes, Ophelia’s brother. Laertes vows to avenge the death of his sister and father. With him Claudius conspires to do away with Hamlet. The king arranges that Laertes is to challenge Hamlet to a friendly duel and kill him with a poisoned rapier. In the duel, Laertes wounds Hamlet but is himself struck with the same poisoned weapon. Before death, Laertes reveals the plot. The queen, at this moment, has drunk from a poisoned cup intended for Hamlet. Hamlet, in a passion, stabs the king, and then dies through his poisoned wound, giving the election to the crown to Fortinbras of Norway.

The protagonist of Hamlet is Prince Hamlet of Denmark, son of the recently deceased king Hamlet and Queen Gertrude. After the death of the king, he returns home from the University of Wittenberg. At that time, his uncle Claudius proclaims himself king and hastily marries his mother Gertrude. Then Horatio, the best friend of Hamlet, tells Hamlet that he has seen king Hamlet’s ghost. So Hamlet resolves to see the ghost himself. That night, the Ghost appears again and tells Hamlet that he is the spirit of his father and discloses that Claudius murdered king Hamlet by pouring poison in his ears. The ghost demands that Hamlet avenge him; Hamlet agrees and decides to fake insanity to avert suspicion. For a long time, people have different opinions about Hamlet’s insanity. Some think Hamlet pretends to be insane completely. The English prose writer Charles lamb and romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge think that Hamlet is half insane (Xiaomei Gao, 2000). In the
age of Elizabeth, some psychologists thought that love or hatred, sadness or happiness, sorrow or anger, if any kind of these emotions is excessive, it will lead people to be insane. Hamlet is stricken by these misfortunes—father’s death and mother’s remarriage. He is unable to stand these pressures, so he asks for leaving his country to release his sadness. If Hamlet is on the edge of insanity at that time, then the conversation between him and his father’s ghost, the betrayal of Ophelia and his two friends smash the only hope of Hamlet and lead him to be real insane. So some scholars think Hamlet’s mood goes to extremes which make him really insane. The author believes that Hamlet just feign insanity to protect himself and only take insanity as a strategy to fight against his enemies.

**Conversations before Hamlet’s Insanity**

Because of his father’s death, Hamlet returns home from the University of Wittenberg. When he comes on the stage, Hamlet is mourning for his father. The Queen doesn’t want him back to Wittenberg to continue his study but to stay with her. Here is the conversation between him and his mother.

*Queen:* Let not thy mother lose her prayers, *Hamlet:* I pray thee, stay with us; go not to Wittenberg.

*Hamlet:* I shall in all my best obey you, madam.

It can be seen from this conversation that Hamlet answers his mother’s request in a manifest way: I shall in all my best obey you, madam. He makes his intention obvious to his mother. So the Queen can understand his intention easily and accurately: Hamlet will not go to Wittenberg. In this case, Hamlet’s words have achieved a great contextual effect and the Queen put no unjustifiable expenditures of processing effort in achieving the effect. Their communication comes to the optimal relevance. Horatio, the best friend of Hamlet, tells Hamlet that he has seen the king Hamlet’s ghost. Here, Hamlet is asking more details about the ghost.

*Hamlet:* What, look’d he frowningly?

*Horatio:* A countenance more in sorrow than in anger.

*Hamlet:* Pale or red?

*Horatio:* Nay, very pale.

*Hamlet:* And fix’d his eyes upon you?

*Horatio:* Most constantly.

From their conversation, it can be recognized that all the questions Hamlet asks and all the answers Horatio replies are in their mutual cognitive environment—some details about Hamlet father’s ghost. After Hamlet asks “What, look’d he frowningly”, in his cognitive environment, there exist two assumptions: 1. Yes, he looks frowningly. 2. No, he doesn’t look frowningly. When Horatio answers his question, the new information combines with Hamlet’s existing assumption and yields contextual implication—the late king doesn’t look frowningly but more in sorrow. Then Hamlet asks another question “Pale or red?” In this case, it has three assumptions in Hamlet’s cognitive environment: A. Pale. B. Red. C. Neither pale nor red. So when he hears Horatio’s answer “Nay, very pale”, this new information strengthens Hamlet’s existing assumption A and it is relevant in this situation. Therefore, their conversation has achieved great contextual effects. With little processing efforts, they can continue their conversation smoothly. So we can draw a conclusion that their conversation also achieves the optimal relevance.

**Conversations after Hamlet’s Insanity**

In order to get a clear idea about Hamlet’s insanity, the author emphasizes on conversation between Hamlet and Polonius. This conversation occurs in the background that the new king and the Queen wanted to know the reason of Hamlet’s insanity. Polonius thought it dues to Hamlet’s passion for his daughter Ophelia. So he decided to have a talk with Hamlet to confirm it. It is better to see some relative cognitive environment of Hamlet and Polonius. Polonius (1) Hamlet reacts likes an insane person. (2) Hamlet is insane or not. (3) Hamlet loves Ophelia, daughter of Polonius.
Hamlet’s insanity due to the refusal of Ophelia. It is known to all, Hamlet’s father, the late king was killed by snake. Others. Hamlet (1) Hamlet is normal. (2) Hamlet pretends to go insane. (3) Other people think the late king was killed by snake. (4) The late king was murdered by his brother. (5) Polonius wants to confirm Hamlet’s insanity. (6) Hamlet must pretend to go insane to protect himself. (7) Polonius is a simple-minded fool. (8) Others. Polonius miscalculate Hamlet’s cognitive environment and dues to his weak inferential ability, so he cannot understand Hamlet’s true meaning. Taking advantage of his weakness, Hamlet cheats Polonius successfully and expresses his inner feeling at the same time. As stand-bys, we should understand Hamlet’s true meaning well.

Polonius: Not I, my lord.

Hamlet: Then I would you were so honest a man.

Polonius doesn’t perceive Hamlet’s ironic meaning. According to Hamlet’s unreasonable response, he makes a judgment: Hamlet is truly insane. As he doesn’t know Hamlet’s cognitive environment, so Hamlet’s words have little contextual effort to Polonius, then he needs great processing effort. Due to his weak inferential ability, the result is the same: he doesn’t perceive Hamlet’s satirical meaning and Hamlet’s words have no relevance to him.

Polonius: Honest, my lord?

Hamlet: Ay sir. To be honest, as this world goes, is to be one man picked out of ten thousand.

Polonius: That’s very true, my lord.

Because Polonius doesn’t understand Hamlet’s true meaning, so he refuses to receive the assumption “fishmonger is honest”. That is to say, he thinks this phrase has no relevance. When Hamlet answers Polonius’s question, “honest” returns to its original meaning. Due to Hamlet’s cognitive environment, Polonius is connected with dishonest. Therefore, Hamlet meant that Polonius is impossible to be the honest man picked out of ten thousand. However, Polonius doesn’t recognize Hamlet’s words and agrees with him.

Polonius: Will you walk out of the air, my lord?

Hamlet: Into my grave?

Polonius: My honorable lord, I will most humbly take my leave of you.

Hamlet: You cannot, sir, take from me anything that I will more willingly part withal—except my life, except my life, except my life.

In the conversations, Hamlet distorts Polonius’s words intentionally and tells about the image of life and death, for example, grave. In fact, it contains abundant meanings. Hamlet knows his father was murdered by his uncle, so he always thinks about some problems of life and death. In Polonius’s eyes, Hamlet’s words lack of relevance. But Hamlet’s true meaning is that except his death, he will take revenge on Polonius and other people. So Hamlet’s words are relevant. By analyzing their conversations, it can be seen that Hamlet is in the domain control position. He knows well Polonius’s cognitive environment, so he can understand Polonius’s words. On the other hand, Polonius miscalculates Hamlet’s cognitive environment, so he is unable to find the relevance and comprehend implications of Hamlet’s words. There is no doubt that, Hamlet is the winner of these conflict conversations. He achieves his two goals: (1) make Polonius believe that he is insane. (2) satirize and make fun of Polonius. According to this conversation, Shakespeare also attains his intention: let people know that Hamlet is not insane, because Hamlet’s words have strong logic and relevance. Gertrude summons Hamlet to her closet to demand an explanation for Hamlet’s arrogant attitude towards his uncle—the new king. In the bedchamber, an argument erupts between Hamlet and Gertrude. Their conversation starts well enough—a mother scolding her son: “Hamlet, thou hast they father much offended.” But her son immediately takes control of the situation: “Mother, you have my father much offended.” His passion alarms Gertrude. Polonius, who is spying on the whole scene behind the arras, panics when it seems as if Hamlet is about to murder the Queen and cries for help. Hamlet, believing it is Claudius hiding behind the arras, stabs wildly, killing Polonius. Gertrude is very afraid.

Queen: What a rash and bloody deed is this!

Hamlet: A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good mother, as kill a king and marry with his brother.
Queen: As kill a king?

In Gertrude’s cognitive environment, the bloody deed is that his son kills the Polonius which is bloody and cruel, so she censures her son for his rash and “bloody deed.” But at the same time, Hamlet doubts his mother as an insider or participant of his father’s murder. In Hamlet’s cognitive environment, the bloody deed is that his mother and uncle murder his father. This can well explain why he echoes Gertrude’s phrase with scorn. After killing my father and marring with my uncle, you have no reason to condemn me for that! Such a deed in not worth mentioning at all in your evil eyes! Due to their different cognitive environment, Hamlet’s words yield no contextual effect and has no relevance to her. Due to her confusion and try to seek optimal relevance with Hamlet, she echoes Hamlet’s phrase-As kill a king? This also declares her innocence of the murder. Laertes arrives back from France, enraged by his father and sister’s death. Claudius convinces Laertes that Hamlet is solely responsible and proposes a fencing match between Laertes and Hamlet in which Laertes would fight with a poison-tipped sword, but tacitly plans to offer Hamlet poisoned wine if that fails. This conversation occurs between Hamlet and Horatio who tries to persuade Hamlet to give up this match.

Horatio: You will lose this wager, my lord.

Hamlet: I do not think so; since he went into France I have been in continual practice: I shall win at the odds.

At the beginning, Horatio expresses his intention in a manifest way that Hamlet will lose this bet. Hamlet can understand Horatio’s words easily and also gives his answer in a directly way which achieves a great contextual effect and makes Horatio understand his meaning easily—I don’t think that I will lose that bet and with so many practices, I have confidence to win. Both of them can comprehend the other’s intention successfully, so their conversation has a great relevance.

Conclusion

A really insane person has seriously disordered mentality. On the other hand, the person who pretends to be insane is due to some particular situation. In fact, it is just a special tactics. These two cases are opposite and cannot coexist at the same time like water and fire. These two opposite phenomena cannot appear in the same person. Therefore the opinion that Hamlet is half really insane and half pretended to be insane is paradoxical. After his father’s death, his mother married his uncle who was the murderer of his father. Due to his mother’s betrayal and his lover’s refusal, he feels lonely and hopeless. Because his enemy is his uncle—the new king, there is no doubt that his enemy has greater power than him, feigning insanity is an effective way to protect himself and take revenge. Hamlet had different conversations with different people. As to his mother and Polonius, he said in a more complicated way which seemed irrelevant to them and needed more processing efforts to interpret. But the conversations between him and his only friend Horatio are always optimal relevant. In fact, Hamlet’s words are logic. It is his wisdom that made other people believe his insanity. Relevance Theory presents a new approach to the study of human communication. According to Sperber and Wilson, relevance is determined by cognitive effect. The greater the cognitive effect achieved by processing a new assumption, the greater the relevance. Whenever a person sets out to communicate something, he automatically communicates the presumption that what he is going to say is believed to be optimally relevant to us. Thus it can be seen that the goal of human communication is optimal relevance. Overall, Relevance Theory has provided a better understanding of human communication and inner thoughts of people.

References

