Application of Relevance Theory to Discourse Teaching

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Abstract

This thesis sets out to examine one of the most important aspects of discourse—discourse coherence and try to research discourse coherence on the basis of a cognitive theory—Relevance Theory. It aims to apply theory to discourse teaching in college English and improve students' ability in discourse reading and understanding.

Key words: Relevance theory; Discourse coherence; Discourse teaching

INTRODUCTION

As an important element in discourse formation, discourse coherence has been a focus of attention in the field of discourse analysis since the beginning, for it has something to do with every aspect about how and why a passage can be considered as a discourse. Previous researches on discourse coherence, both semantic and pragmatic, have contributed greatly to our understanding of this phenomenon. However, that is not enough for analyzing discourse coherence since it is a very complex phenomenon. Discourse coherence can be guaranteed by some cohesive devices but in most cases people do not show the coherent relations so apparently in a discourse. Sometimes a seemingly incoherent discourse is in fact coherent in some way. The purpose of this thesis is to explore discourse coherence from a new perspective—Relevance theory, a cognitive pragmatic perspective to see the nature of discourse coherence and finally apply this analysis to discourse teaching.

1. THE RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

As it is mentioned above this thesis pays attention to study discourse coherence on the basis of Relevance Theory. The reason for connecting these two things together is two-folded.

Brown and Yule (1983, p.1) define discourse as "language in use" and remark that "the analysis of discourse is necessarily, the analysis of language in use." Cook (1994, p.25) describes discourse as "A stretch of language in use, taking on meaning in context for its users, and perceived by them as purposeful, meaningful and connected." From these definitions it is obvious that discourse is quite different from sentence and other linguistic units, which can be studied from a purely linguistic perspective. Discourse analysis is to investigate how naturally occurring language is applied to human communication, how it is integrated with other non-linguistic factors properly, and what functions language serves to perform in human communication. Relevance Theory aims at exploring the nature of communication. It studies human communication from a cognitive perspective. Therefore, it can be applied to discourse analysis so as to explore coherence, which is an important factor in discourse analysis. That is the first reason.

The second reason is that human communication involves two types of acting: One is to express and the other is to understand. Discourse is a dynamic process in which participants spontaneously cooperated with each other as the communication goes on. Each of the participants, the communicator and the audience, makes his contribution to the on-going discourse communication.

So coherence is also a dynamic process, which is achieved by the mutual efforts made by both participants. A successful communication involves contribution of the communicator and the audience: On one hand the communicator manifests his thoughts to his audience with proper linguistic or non-linguistic forms, on the other hand the audience receives and transforms the linguistic or non-linguistic codes into the intended interpretation. Thus, the notion of coherence turns out to be the question of how successful communication is achieved. In order to study how communication can be achieved, Sperber and Wilson put forward two principles of relevance and see communication as an Ostensive-Inferential process. Therefore, Ostensive-Inferential Communication model can be applied to explain how coherence is achieved by the effort of the communicator and the audience.

2. THE OSTENSIVE-INFERENTIAL COMMUNICATION

Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson in their co-edited book, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1986 aims to explore the nature of human communication. According to Relevance Theory human communication is a certain kind of cognition, which is relevance-oriented. That is to say, people tend to pay attention to the information that seems most relevant to them. The fundamental assumption is that cognition tends to maximize effects with minimum amount of effort. They view communication as an Ostensive-Inferential process in which the communicator makes a guarantee of relevance in ostension and the audience searches for relevance existed by inference.

According to Sperber and Wilson, both the previous Code Model and Inferential Model have certain interpretive power to human communication, though they are different, they are not incompatible; they can be combined in various ways. In general, an encoding-decoding process is subservient to Grice's inferential process. The reason is that linguistic encoding and decoding is necessary, but it's not enough to encode what the communicator really means and the inferential process needs the output of decoding as a piece of evidence about the communicator's intentions. They describe communication as follows:

> Verbal communication is a complex form of communication. Linguistic coding and decoding is involved, but the linguistic meaning of an uttered sentence falls short of encoding what the speaker means: It merely helps the audience infer what she means. The output of decoding is correctly treated by the audience as a piece of evidence about the communicator's intentions. In other words, a coding-decoding process is subservient to a Gricean inferential process.
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> (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995, p.27)

Sperber and Wilson study communication from a cognitive perspective and argue that communication is not only an inferential process but also an ostensive behaviour. Based on the Inferential Model, they propose the *Ostensive-Inferential Communication.* Following part will be focused on ostension and inference in detail.

2.1 An Ostensive Behaviour and Communication

The behaviour that makes manifest an intention to make something manifest is called "ostensive behaviour" or simply "ostension" by Sperber and Wilson. According to them, "a fact is manifest to an individual at a given time if and only if he is capable at the time of representing it mentally and accepting its representation as true or probably true." (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995, p.29)

Ostensive behaviour is the behaviour that intends to attract an audience's attention to some phenomenon. In order to achieve a successful communication, a communicator, by the very act of claiming an audience's attention, communicates that the information he is offering is relevant enough to be worth the audience's attention. In the process of ostension the communicator first makes his intention manifest to the audience by some ostensive behaviours, both verbal and non-verbal. Then from which the audience can infer the communicator's intention. Suppose that Peter and Jane are talking about Mary in office. Jane is saying bad things about Mary when John notices that Mary is coming near, so he winks at Jane. Noticing John's hint, Jane can make the assumption that John's behavior is uncommon here, by his behavior he must want to show her something, otherwise it is meaningless. Then she may notice the presence of Mary and stops talking about her. That is she recognizes John's intention. In this case, as a result of John's hint, the presence of Mary is made manifest to Jane. It has become manifest that John had himself noticed Mary and intend Jane to notice her too. John's behavior is an ostensive one.

The study of ostension is from the communicator's point of view, that is, the communicator who produces an ostensive stimulus—verbal and non-verbal—tries to make his intentions manifest to his audience, from which the audience can infer what he means. Ostensive behaviour is human intentional, which can be both verbal and non-verbal. That is communication *as an ostensive process.*

2.2 An Inferential Process and Communication

Sperber and Wilson agree with Grice that communication is not simply a matter of encoding and decoding, but also involves inference. The crucial mental faculty that enables human beings to communicate with one another is the ability to draw inferences from people's behaviour. According to Grice, the fundamental principle of communication is CP and its maxims. By obeying or violating them, the audience can infer the implicature of the communicator. However, according to Sperber and Wilson there is no CP and such rules that people

must obey in communication. Though they propose the principle of relevance, it's not a rule that governs the process of communication. Communicators do not follow the principle of relevance, nor do they violate it even if they want to, because the principle of relevance applies without exception: Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of relevance. Relevance is fundamental to communication, not because communicators obey the maxims of relevance, but because relevance is fundamental to cognition.

According to Sperber and Wilson, people make inference not based on CP and its maxims but on the basis of mutual cognitive environments between the communicator and the audience. They define cognitive environment of an individual as "a set of facts that are manifest to him." (Sperber & Wilson 1986/1995, p.39) They use cognitive environment to replace shared knowledge because according to them the notion of what is manifest to an individual is clearly weaker than the notion of what is actually known or assumed. A fact can be manifest without being known; all the individual's actual assumptions are manifest to him, but many more assumptions which he has not actually made are manifest to him, too. The success of communication is built on the basis of mutual cognitive environments between the communicator and the audience instead of the mutual-knowledge or shared knowledge.

Therefore, from the audience's point of view, after receiving the ostension, he first decodes the information from the communicator's ostensive behaviour and treats the evidence he gets from the decoding as a part of premises. Then he infers towards a certain direction by combining the utterance meaning (the new information) with the information manifested in his cognitive environment to achieve a successful communication. That is communication as an *Inferential Process*.

2.3 Nature of Ostensive-Inferential Communication

According to Relevance Theory, communication is both an ostensive behaviour and an inferential process. They are one and the same process but seen from two different angles. From the communicator's point of view, it is an ostension that the communicator makes his intention mutually manifest by certain ostensive behaviours and from the audience's point of view, it is an inferential process that the audience infers the communicator's intention based on the ostensive behaviours of the communicator.

To combine these two sides together, a complete characterization of communication—Ostensive-Inferential Communication can be achieved. Sperber and Wilson define Ostensive-Inferential Communication as follow.

> Ostensive-Inferential Communication: The communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to communicator and audience that the communicator intends, by

means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions I.

(Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p.63)

In the process of communication the communicator may make manifest a set of assumptions to the audience by his ostensive behaviour and from which the audience infers the communicator's intention. Here one point should be paid attention to is that how the audience can infer the intended interpretation of the communicator since the communicator can make manifest several assumptions by one ostensive behaviour. It is at this point that *principle of relevance* and the *presumption of optimal relevance* come in. Sperber and Wilson claim that "ostension comes with a tacit guarantee of relevance." (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995, p.49). That is to say, the communicator makes a guarantee of relevance by his ostensive behaviour and makes the audience believe that it is worth paying effort to process.

3. APPLICATION OF RELEVANCE THEORY TO DISCOURSE TEACHING

Discourse teaching is the communication between teacher and students in class. The present teaching method prefers that the class should not be dominated only by the teacher, but encourages the involvement of the students, that is, the interactive teaching between teacher and students. This does not mean that the teacher's role is unimportant. Instead, the teacher is like a conductor of an orchestra, who directs the process of the class. He gives advice, provides explanations, helps find suitable materials and leads the students to think by themselves. In class the teachers' ostensive behaviors directly influence the students. They should choose the suitable ways to express themselves, that is, by this way the students can achieve more information with less effort. They should also encourage the involvement of the students. Pair work, group work and class work among students are preferred. Teachers and students cooperate with each other and participant in the teaching and learning process so that the students have more opportunities to interact with the teachers and their classmates. This way of teaching can arouse student's initiative, develop their potential and strengthen their communicative abilities.

Coherence is an important feature in discourse. To understand a discourse thoroughly, people must be clear about the coherent relations in discourse. According to Relevance Theory, coherence can be achieved by searching for relevance to get contextual effects. The greater the effects are, the greater the relevance will be. That is, the communicator makes a guarantee of relevance in communication and the audience tries to find the contextual effects of utterances in discourse, and finally recognizes the relevance. Therefore, in discourse teaching the teacher should help the students to find

the relevance exists in discourse by providing adequate relevant information to enrich the students' cognitive environment so that they can find the coherent relations in discourse. The teacher should provide background knowledge of the discourse and helps the students to activate the relevant information, based on which students can generalize hypothesis and predictions about the discourse. They can test their hypothesis, correct their prediction, extend prediction and confirm their comprehension in the reading process.

To activate the students' relevant knowledge, the teacher can hold discussions, present questions and provide necessary information for them. Before reading, the teacher can call the students' attention to the title, the illustration of the discourse, and the questions related to the discourse. These can serve as important clues to the gist of the discourse and the author's central intention, thus arouse the students' interest, inspire their imagination, and acquaint them with the main points and the style of the discourse. In the process of teaching, the teacher should create a reading environment conductive to the students' forming, confirming and revising their predictions. He can achieve this by requiring the students to predict and reflect on what the discourse is going to talk based on the preceding discourse information and knowledge in their cognitive environment as well as their experience. The students can ask why the author arranges the discourse in this way but not that way; what he will say next, that is, to encourage the students to make dialogue with the author. It is obvious that the greater the students' knowledge about the discourse, the better their understandings will be. Therefore, the teacher should try all means to enlarge the students' background knowledge, especially, when the discourse involves the cultural knowledge. Culture is an all-embracing notion that includes all aspects of human life. Language, as a part of culture, is also influenced by it. Due to its different history, each nation forms its own unique culture, which is consequently reflected in the way of language use. Therefore, in discourse teaching the teachers have the following responsibilities.

• To get the students familiar with cultural differences, especially the difference in discourse organizing.

• To help the students transcend their own culture and see things as the members of the target culture will.

• To emphasize the inseparability of understanding language and understanding culture through various classroom practices.

As a matter of fact, discourse learning can be regarded as the communication between the writers and the readers. When the writer arranges his writing, he always has the target readers in his mind, which influences his ostensive behavior—the way that he chooses to express himself. While in reading the reader should make constant interaction with the writer through the writing so as to fully understand the writer's intention. Therefore, in the process of discourse learning except the effort made by the teacher, the students should also actively get involved in it. They should try their best to find the coherent relations in the discourse and to get a profound understanding to the discourse.

So far the author has studied discourse as a dynamic process and focused on the factors that influence or determine the comprehension of a discourse. While discourse is both a dynamic process and a static product, so discourse teaching also involves the teaching of vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, rhetorical devices, etc. In the process of discourse teaching, the teacher explains the language points; analyze the rhetorical relations between sentences, and helps the students to find the cohesive devices make a discourse coherent. Here the author will not discuss discourse-as-product in detail, for the analysis is focused on the cooperation between the teacher and the students to the better understanding of discourse based on the analysis of discourse coherence on the framework of ostensive-inferential communication model formulated in Relevance Theory.

Based on the above analysis, the role of teacher is generalized as follows:

• To provide adequate information about the discourse to the students, such as the background of the discourse and the author,

• To present the main idea of the discourse to the students, let them have a basic understanding about the discourse,

• To encourage the involvement of the students by asking questions relevant to the discourse or organizing group work,

• To analyze the discourse and constantly enlarge the cognitive environment of the student with the process of discourse understanding, let the students find the coherent relations in the discourse by various cohesive devices and find relevance existed in the discourse,

• To infer the intention of the author in writing the sentence, the paragraph and the discourse.

As it is mentioned above, to make better understanding of a discourse it is not enough to pay attention to linguistic factors, one should also pay attention to non-linguistic factors relevant to the discourse, such as culture, encyclopedic knowledge, etc. In discourse teaching, the teacher should not only help the students to recognize the coherent relations in a discourse realized by cohesive devices but also by searching for relevance existed in a discourse. Students should get actively involved in the learning process and make their own contribution in interpreting the discourse. The co- involvement of teacher and students in discourse teaching is fundamentally important and necessary.

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