1. Short Definition

Pragmatics can be succinctly defined as the study of meaning in context. Although it does not have a long history as an independent academic subject of inquiry, the field has always been vibrant with diverse approaches, cross-disciplinary interactions, and several ingenious and highly sophisticated theoretical frameworks. In Chinese linguistics and applied language studies, pragmatics has also aroused great interests, all the more so because the term “pragmatics” is translated into Chinese as yǔyòngxué [语用学], meaning “the study of language use” which can often be shortened into yǔyòng [语用] (language use). Thus, pragmatics in Chinese has acquired a broader interpretation, encompassing all aspects of language use, making it more liable to be recognized as a useful subject of study by Chinese-speakers, whether or not they have been exposed to the more rigorously defined pragmatic studies.

2. Pragmatic Phenomena

Although there are several strands of pragmatics, due to page limit, this essay is only focused on linguistic pragmatics, which claims the longest tradition and has always been engaged with central aspects of pragmatic inquiry. Linguistic pragmatics evolved from the school of Ordinary Language Philosophy as represented by the works of Anglo-analytic philosophers J.L. Austin (who is the founder of Speech Act Theory), P.F. Strawson (who initiated studies on presupposition), and H.P. Grice (founder of the theory of Logic in Conversation). It became a self-contained discipline at the beginning of the 1980’s, heralded by the publication of two territory-defining textbooks: Levinson (1983) and Leech (1983). It differs from linguistic semantics in that it goes beyond the analyses of word meaning and sentence meaning treated respectively by lexical and compositional semantics and studies how sentence meaning is developed and even twisted in discourse. Its focal object of study is utterance meaning, which is roughly equivalent to propositional meaning read off a sentence in a given use context. The initial meaning of a sentence, composing out of the meaning of the words contained therein, when uttered in a context, may need to be explicated, through disambiguation and enrichment, to its full-fledged literal meaning, also called explicature. In addition, it may trigger the perception of a hidden and separate proposition taken for granted by the speaker, formally called presupposition. Furthermore, it may implicate some extra, inferred propositions that the speaker tries to convey through the use of the original sentence, what is termed implicature. On top of all these layers of pragmatic meaning, a sentence always conveys a higher-order sense: what the speaker wants to do with the proposition or the set of propositions he produces: be it for making a statement, performing a speech act such as declaring, requesting, naming or
marruying, making commentaries such as in a football live show, giving directions such as in an i-pad manual or in a recipe, expressing irony in that what is stated is to be taken as contrary to what is intended to convey ... These additional tones variously attached to the propositions expressed form kinds of propositional attitude or higher-order explicature. Last but not least, some words and expressions can only be interpreted with reference to the physical properties in the situation of utterance, thereby revealing the very essential referential nature of natural language, that of using language to point to things in the vicinity, with demonstrative or symbolic gestures, what is called the deictic or indexical use of language. The notions introduced so far form a cluster of pragmatic phenomena that have received extensive studies in the literature. Each of them is illustrated below with two representative examples in Chinese.

[1] méi xiǎng dào nǐ hái tǐng néng hē , yě tǐng néng liáo 。

没想到你还挺能喝，也挺能聊。

“I was surprised to find that you can drink a lot, and can talk a lot too.”

[Explicature: Explicating the sentence so as to supplement what is left unsaid: what you drink is alcoholic, not just any soft drinks or water.]

[2] shì zhě sòng shàng jiān hǎo de niú pái ， wǒ fēn fù guò tā ， jiān dé lǎo diǎn ， qiē kāi shí ， lǐmiàn háishì hóng hóng de xuē sī 。

侍者送上煎好的牛排, 我吩咐过他, 煎得老点, 切开时, 里面还是红红的血丝。

“The waiter served our steaks. Although I had told him to cook the steaks well-done, when they were carved up, there were still threads of red blood.”

[Explicature: The word lǎo (old) is enriched to give the special interpretation “well-done” in this context.]

[3] hěnshǎo yǒu rén zhī dà o ， fāmíng zì xíng chē de shì déguó de yī gè kànlín rén ， míng jiào dé lái sī 。

很少有人知道，发明自行车的是德国的一个看林人, 名叫德莱斯。

“Not many people know that the man who invented the bicycle was a German forester called Drais.”

[Presupposition: The de-construction fāmíng zì xíng chē de (发明自行车的) serves as a presupposition trigger showing that the speaker takes it for granted that the bicycle has been invented. This information is presupposed rather than asserted because nowhere in the sentence is the information “the bicycle has been invented” explicitly stated. What is explicitly stated is only the identity of the inventor of the bicycle.]
zhèxiē kòngdì, yàoshi yònglái zhòng zhāngjià, guójiā jiù bú yòng huā nàme duō wàihuì jinkǒu liánghshi le。

这些空地，要是用来种庄稼，国家就不用花那么多外汇进口粮食了。

“If these abandoned lands are used to plant crops, our country will no longer have to spend so much foreign currency to import grains.”

[Presupposition: “bú yòng huā nàme duō wàihuì” presupposes the fact that a lot has already been spent or at least has been committed to spend on purchasing something.]

“wǒ xiǎng nǐ yěxǔ bù shì qù sàn bù de,” tā túláo wúyì de pángqiāocè jī shuō。

“我想你也许不是去散步的，”他徒劳无益地旁敲侧击说。

“‘I thought maybe you didn’t [go for a walk],’ he said, beating about the bush in the most useless manner.” (from Sister Carrie, Chapter XXIII, by Theodore Dreiser.)

[Implicature: the speaker hinted at some other propositions, e.g. that he suspected that she was seeing someone else. Neither in form nor in meaning does the intended implicature bear any similarities with the original sentence.]

“gāngcái chī fàn shí jiàn nǐ méi chī shénme dōngxi, xiǎngbì shì wèikòu bu hǎo。

刚才吃饭时见你没吃什么东西，想必是胃口不好。

“At the dinner just now, I saw that you didn't eat much. Thought you must have had a rather bad appetite.”

[Implicature: Although “méi chī shénme dōngxi” explicitly asserts that not much was eaten, it implicates that something was eaten, even though the quantity was minimal. This is because, according to the theory of scalar implicature, “shénme dōu méi chī” (什么都没吃) and “méi chī shénme” (没吃什么) can be said to form an ordered set < shénme dōu méi chī, méi chī shénme >. The item to the left is semantically stronger than the one to the right, conveying information that is higher in degree, larger in number, or more informative than the weaker one. The mention of the item to the right implicates the unavailability of the item to the left, as the speaker wants to be informative to the right extent.]

zī rènming X xiǎnshēng wéi jiùdiàn shìchǎng xiāoshòubù zǒngjiān。

兹任命 X 先生为酒店市场销售部总监。

“Mr. X is hereby appointed as the director of the Marketing Sales Department of the hotel.”

[Propositional attitude: a speech act of appointing.]
[8] fēi xiàng guò hé bù shǒu lǐ ，shuāngjiǎo wù tà duìmiàn wèi 。

飞象过河不守礼，双脚勿踏对面位。

“(Hong Kong Bus notice) Literally: It is against the rule (in Chinese chess) to march your elephant across the boundary river into the opponent’s half. Paraphrase: Do not put your feet on the opposite seat.”

[Propositional attitude: an indirect speech act, making a request in the guise of a statement.]

[9] jīntiān wǒmen zhè’ér xià yǔ le，bù zhīdào háiyǒu nǎxiē dìfāng xiàyǔ le 。

今天我们这儿下雨了，不知道还有哪些地方下雨了。

“Today it rained here at our place. Don’t know which other places also had rain.”

[Deictic use of jīntiān (today), wǒmen (we) and zhè’ér (here), whose exact referents can only be worked out with reference to the parameters of the utterance act, such as information about the speaker, the place and the time of the utterance, etc.]

One common feature shared by the terms introduced above is that such kinds of pragmatic meaning are inferred rather than completely encoded. That is, pragmatic meaning is never directly gleaned from the encoded meaning of linguistic expressions alone, and can only be obtained by making contextualized inferences, using the linguistic expressions as the starting point of total meaning construction. Hence what matters is not just the identification and analysis of pragmatic phenomena per se, but also the characterization of the general inferential mechanism involved. This calls for the need of an explanatory theory of pragmatics that can give an adequate account of the inference mechanism, has the potential of giving unified analyses of all the pragmatic phenomena, and is sympathetic and compatible with recent developments in related areas and disciplines, notably cognitive science, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, clinical linguistics, natural language logic, artificial intelligence, and information technology.

3. Pragmatic Theory

There have been several sophisticated theories of pragmatics, each competing with the others in trying to achieve explanatory adequacy. Only one of them, relevance theory, is presented here in detail and applied to the analysis of cases in Chinese.¹ Aiming at providing a cognitive account of utterance interpretation, relevance theory tries to characterize pragmatic inference with psychological reality, i.e. true to what people do in real-life communication. The theory starts with the underdeterminacy thesis, arguing that every sentence needs to have its encoded meaning developed through inference to reach the more complete meaning. Meaning

construction in this sense is carried out in the cognitive context of the hearer, formed by the new assumptions in the utterance he receives and the old assumptions he retrieves from his memory in order to process the new ones. When old and new assumptions interact, cognitive effects can be generated, in the form of deductive conclusions or strengthened assumptions or updated ones that contradict and replace old ones. But the cognitive context can be a vast pool of assumptions in which old assumptions can freely interact with the new ones, and the resulting cognitive effects will initiate even newer interactions, ad infinitum. The hearer has no time nor resources to process and evaluate every conceivable cognitive effect before deciding on the one she takes to be the intended meaning conveyed by the speaker. What she can do is to pick one cognitive effect that she can get without exerting too much cognitive effort and take it to be the one intended by the speaker. This will not sound so arbitrary when several related factors are taken into consideration. First, the multitude of old assumptions in the cognitive context are not scattered in disarray, but are ranked and stacked, according to their different degrees of accessibility in the memory. As old assumptions are retrieved for the purpose of processing the new assumption, the most readily retrieved must be the most accessible, which is most likely to interact with the new assumptions, and most likely to yield enough cognitive effects without costing undue processing effort. Such an interpretation of the utterance is termed an optimally relevant interpretation. Second, the hearer is not working all by herself. She is also aided by the speaker in an unconscious, yet intuitively quasi-cooperative way. The speaker knows that, in order to get his meaning across, there is an optimally relevant way to express his thoughts, one that matches with the somewhat individualistic knowledge state of the hearer to the extent that this is made known to him. That should be the manner of expression he unconsciously chooses to employ. Thirdly, according to relevance theory, communication is by nature a guess work, miscommunication does occur frequently, especially between parties who do not make pertinent judgments of each other’s knowledge state. When communication occurs, the hearer can only presume that the speaker has something to inform that will let her derive enough cognitive effects without exerting unjustified extra processing effort. This is called the presumption of optimal relevance. The speaker chooses his wording with the knowledge that the hearer uses the presumption of optimal relevance as an expectation in communication. Hence his wording is likely to help the hearer to infer his meaning, and he can have some degree of confidence that his utterance will be comprehended. And the hearer will take her first interpretation as the intended meaning of the speaker, without bothering to entertain alternative interpretations. This intersubjective production and comprehension process makes it possible for communication to succeed with much efficiency, even though it does not guarantee the success, as a presumption is a weakest assumption and may often turn out not to be failsafe, especially when the communicative parties are not able to make the right judgments of each other’s knowledge state due to unfamiliarity, lapse of memory, or physical or mental exhaustion. Relevance theory summarizes the above considerations into the Principle of Relevance: Every utterance comes with a presumption of its own optimal relevance. Utterance comprehension can now be viewed as a cognitive act in search of relevance. The underdetermined meaning of an utterance is developed to the extent that optimal relevance is attained, which is also the first relevant interpretation that the hearer
can read off the processed utterance. Hence comprehension, and communication in general, appear to be instantaneous and effortless.

The relevance-theoretic comprehension mechanism can provide a programmatic characterization to the whole range of pragmatic phenomena introduced above. It also has the potential to give accounts to specific cases, with each account being a detailed case-based story. Overall, such a pragmatics starts with the encoded meaning of the utterance, taking the lexical and grammatical meanings as providing conceptual or procedural information. The former initiates other relevant assumptions, the latter instructs the hearer on how to establish relevance: whether to trigger a presupposition or to derive an implicature or to take the proposition with a special attitude or to obtain a specific deictic referent. Assumption introduction and deduction is guided by procedural cues, and is constrained by the principle of relevance, making it possible for pragmatic phenomena to be comprehended in no time, in spite of the paucity of explicitly encoded meaning. Relevance theory is particularly helpful in that it can be used to investigate topics that are not wholly linguistic in nature. In such cross-disciplinary studies, relevance theory can often provide a novel explanatory perspective. ²

The next section exams a range of pragmatic cases in Chinese, showing how relevance theory can provide original and specific accounts as well as demonstrating how the study of Chinese pragmatics can make its unique contributions to linguistic pragmatics in both empirical and theoretical aspects.

4. Case Study One: Omitted
5. Case Study Two: Omitted
6. Case Study Three: Omitted

7. Epilogue

This is a highly personal introduction to Chinese theoretical pragmatics, or linguistic pragmatics for Chinese. After introducing some general concepts and pragmatic phenomena, I present relevance theoretic pragmatics and report findings in three original case studies. With these I hope to show how pragmatics can be put to work. It is important for students of Chinese grammar to seek insights in pragmatics so as to give novel accounts of some puzzling grammatical issues. It is equally important for workers of Chinese pragmatics to roll up their sleeves and work on actual topics, rather than remaining at the stage of reading, surveying, and evaluating works and ideas in the West.

References:


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