On Relevance Theory's Explicature/Implicature and Grice's 'What Is Said'/Implicature

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Abstract

Grice's 'what is said'/implicature and relevance theory's explicature/implicature are two prominent views of utterance meaning. With the help of specific examples, this paper compares and studies the definitions of the two theories in detail, as well as their impact on the process of implicature deducing. It is found that Grice's view can indeed explain the generation process of implicature in some simple sentence patterns, but the relevance theory is obviously of wider application value. After discussion, the paper proposes that relevance theory still needs to be further explained in the decoding of utterance, which should be paid attention to in future related research.

Keywords: what is said, relevance theory, explicature, implicature, Grice, cooperation principle

1. Introduction

The expression and understanding of the meaning of language has always been a hot topic in the study of linguists. In recent years, more and more scholars have turned their research attention to pragmatics. Grice, the famous philosopher of language, devoted his life to the study of the meaning of language. The Cooperation Principle and Conversational Implication proposed by him have been widely accepted and applied by researchers, although there are some disputes. Grice clearly distinguishes 'what is said' from 'what is implicated', emphasizing that the literal meaning of the speaker's words is different from the implied meaning of the discourse. This theory has opened up a new way of thinking in the study of linguistic meaning, and once it was put forward, it has aroused extensive discussions among scholars. Relevance theorists (such as Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 1993) deny some parts of Grice's theory, try to replace the Cooperative Principle with Relevance Theory, and challenge Grice's 'what is said' with 'explicature'. The following will compare and analyze the differences between the two theories in the derivation of conversational implicature and their influence on the truth condition of discourse through specific examples, and then discuss the scope of application of the two theories.

2. The Distinction of Grice's 'What Is Said' and

Relevance Theory Explicature

2.1 Amount of Involved Enrichment

A significant feature that distinguishes Grice's 'what is said' from the explicature of relevance theory is whether further enrichment is included. Relevance theorists believe that in conversation, the hearer will tacitly develop the speaker's utterance, so as to obtain the explicit content expressed by the speaker, that is, explicature, as shown in the example:

i. (a) Mary scolded John and he cried.

i. (b) Mary scolded John and then he (John) cried.

According to relevance theory, hearers will enrich the utterance with the most accessible enrichment in combination with the most accessible contextual assumptions, until the enriched content is enough to provide the hearer with the premise needed to obtain cognitive effects. In the above example, only by establishing the sequential relationship between the two events connected by 'and' and clearly knowing that 'he' refers to 'John' in i(a), can the hearer infer the speaker's intention in the specific context. Therefore, 'then' and 'John' (referred by 'he') in i(b) are both developed enrichments, and i(b) is an enriched version of i(a), that is, explicature. Because the explicature must be enough to become one of the effective premises for the hearer to get expected cognitive effects, the amount of enrichment it contains must be sufficient.

In contrast, Gricean 'what is said' shows a different understanding of utterance meaning, especially enrichment. For Grice, 'what is said' just includes the disambiguation of the words used, the judgment of the state of time, and the reference assignment of referential phrases. Considering 'what is said' of the above example 1(a), the hearer can determine that the event occurred in the past according to the past tense of 'scold' and know who the speaker refers to with 'he' (which seems to be similar to explicature). However, this process is only the decoding of the literal information of utterance and does not apply any pragmatic principles. Therefore, Grice's 'what is said' does not include any other pragmatic enrichment, such as the sequential relationship between the two events connected by 'and'.

2.2 Impact on Truth Conditions

The influence of Gricean 'what is said' and the explicature of relevance theory on the utterance's truth condition is also different in many cases. Specifically, this can be explained by the example below:

ii. (a) Have midnight snacks and brush teeth.

ii. (b) Brush teeth and have midnight snacks.

ii(b) is just a version in which the order of the two events connected by 'and' in ii(a) is reversed. Because 'and' has no pragmatic enrichment at the level of 'what is said', the corresponding 'what is said' of these two utterances is exactly the same. According to Grice, 'what is said' is the truth conditional content of the utterance (Carton 2009, 39), so the truth conditions of ii(a) and ii(b) are the same. However, relevance theorists point out that it is the pragmatic inference in 'explicature' that plays an important role in judging the truth condition of utterance (Levinson 2000, p.183). To prove this, we can embed these two utterances into a context of 'it's (comparative) … than' (Levinson 2000, 184):

ii. (c) It's wiser to have midnight snacks and brush teeth than to brush teeth and have midnight snacks.

ii. (d) It's wiser to brush teeth and have midnight snacks than to have midnight snacks and brush teeth.

For Grice, ii(a) and ii(b) with the same 'what is said' make no difference between the truth conditions of ii(c) and ii(d). When we consider the enrichment of 'and' according to the idea of relevance theory, the order of content expressed in ii(a) and ii(b) is reversed. Correspondingly, in the context of 'it's wiser … than', iii(a) is true and iii(b) is false, that is, it is wiser to brush teeth after having midnight snacks than have midnight snacks after brushing teeth. This seems to be more in line with our intuitive judgment of the utterance's truth condition. Therefore, it can be seen that 'what is said' and explicature can contribute different truth conditions to the utterance, and the latter can be reasonably explained in more contexts.

3. The Distinctions in Implicature Derivation of Relevance Theory and Grice

There has never been a unified conclusion on how to distinguish the explicit and implicit meanings

of verbal utterance (Carston 2009, 35). Relevance theory and Grice have two different interpretations of the notion of implicature and its relationship to the proposition expressed.

3.1 Different Notions of Implicature

Relevance theorists regard explicature as the development of the utterance, while implicature as a brand-new idea derived from premises. For further understanding, we can put the sentence of example 2 into a specific context. Suppose John went to the dentist a week ago because of a toothache. Today, John's wife Mary ran into John's dentist and had the following conversation with him:

iii. (a) Dentist: Has John started paying special attention to his dental health?

iii. (b) Mary: He brushed his teeth and had midnight snacks last night.

In this context, the dentist obtained some highly accessible assumptions through Mary's utterance: People will have food residues in their teeth after eating food; if people eat midnight snacks after brushing their teeth, the food debris will not be cleaned up and may result in tooth decay; most people understand this truth. Combined with the enriched version of utterance (i.e., explicature) 'John brushed his teeth and then had midnight snacks last night', the dentist would make the conclusion (i.e., implicature) 'John has not started paying attention to his dental health'. This conclusion is a new thought because Mary did not directly express John's attitude towards his dental health in her utterance.

However, Grice believes that any pragmatic enrichment based on 'what is said' is implicature. If this example is explained according to Grice's logic, Mary's 'what is said' would refer to 'John brushed his teeth and had midnight snacks last night'. Combined with the maxim of relation in cooperation principle, the dentist would know that Mary's utterance was related to John's attitude, so he would then enrich 'what is said' to obtain the sequential relationship between the two events and infer John's attitude. All these enriched contents are 'what Mary implicated'. Therefore, the notion of implicature explained by Grice involves more content than relevance theory.

3.2 Different Relationships Between the Implicature

and the Expressed Proposition

The expressed proposition and implicature also have different relations. According to Grice, implicature is derived from the decoded information ('what is said') after decoding the literal meaning of the utterance. Thus, there are two independent steps from hearing the expressed utterance to obtaining the implicature. Intuitively, however, it seems that before we further speculate on the speaker's intention, we can get some information beyond 'what the speaker said' according to the context. Relevance theorists therefore argue that the Gricean implicature is usually part of the explicit content. This can be proved by the 'scope embedding' test (Carston 2002, p.191), as shown in the following example:

iv. If John brushed his teeth and had midnight snacks last night, then his toothache might get worse.

We believe that the truth condition of this sentence is true because we judge with the enriched version of the utterance taken scope over by 'if', that is, 'John brushed his teeth and then had midnight snacks'. If the order of 'brush teeth' and 'have midnight snacks' is not clear, it is impossible to connect these two events with 'John's toothache'. Hence, relevance theorists argue that the process of obtaining the explicature and implicature of utterance is parallel. In this case, we know from 'John brushed his teeth first and then had midnight snacks' that 'John's toothache might get worse'; And because we have the expectation that 'John's toothache might get worse', we can deduce 'John had midnight snacks after brushing his teeth' through pragmatic enrichment, so as to support our expected implication. Different from the two independent steps proposed by Grice, the derivation of explicature and implicature in relevance theory affects and depends on each other, which can explain more situations.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Through case analysis, it can be seen that Grice's explanation is not as widely applicable as relevance theory. According to Grice, that is, the decoding and connotation of literal meaning are mutually independent and sequential processes. This is a theory further developed on the basis of his Cooperative Principle. This theory is easy to understand if only simple sentence patterns in

daily communication are considered. The hearer first decodes the words spoken by the speaker, then supplements and understands the literal meaning according to the corresponding cooperative principle in combination with the context, and finally obtains the implicature of the discourse. However, once the sentence pattern is slightly complicated, such as the embedded sentence pattern of 'if', the interpretation of decoding first and then deducing often violates the truth condition of the sentence. An assertion that truth conditions in daily life are usually judged wrong may be correct in the 'what is said' of Grice's explanation, but if interpreted according to relevance theory, the truth condition of the sentence explicature is consistent with the fact in a high probability.

However, it cannot be said that relevance theory is a perfect explanation completely superior to Grice's theory. Because relevance theory does not consider the process of the hearer's decoding of the literal meaning of the utterance. Although some studies (Noveck & Posada, 2003) show that the first reaction of the hearer to the speaker's words is the implicature, this does not mean that the hearer does not have a decoding process of the literal meaning of the words, which may be very fast, but it should not be completely ignored. For example, if a person speaks Arabic to an old man who can only understand Chinese, he will naturally be unable to obtain any information, let alone understand the implicature of the utterance. This shows that the listener must have a decoding process, which is very important and the basis of everything else.

In conclusion, Grice's 'what is said'/implicature and relevance theory's explicature/implicature are two important but very different views of utterance meaning. The relevance theory explicature involves more enrichment than Grice's 'what is said', and the truth conditions of utterance judged by the two can also be different. Grice regards the acquisition of expressed proposition and the derivation of implication as two independent processes, and any enrichment beyond the literal decoding of the utterance is implicature. Relevance theorists believe that the derivation of explicature and implicature are mutually influenced, and implicature is a brand-new thought derived from explicature and

contextual assumptions. Although the analysis of examples in this paper shows that relevance theory can explain more situations, it is not a simple thing to clarify the generation mechanism of the implicature of speech. We still need to take a dialectical view of relevance theory and further verify and study it through experiments, surveys, and other methods.

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