

On Pragmatic Strategies for Avoidance of Explicitness in Language

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Abstract

It is common that people avoid explicit language in daily communication. This paper intends to discuss various pragmatic strategies used for avoidance of explicitness in language and to analyze sorts of reasons for the explicitness from the perspective of pragmatics.

Keywords: Explicitness, Conversational implicature, Presequences, Hedges, Politeness Principle, Adaptation theory

1. Introduction

The most simple way for people to speak is that, a speaker utters a sentence and means accurately what he intends to say in the original meaning. That is to say, the speaker conveys his communicative intention in by means of direct expression. However, this straightforward means is not unique. In other words, in daily life, in most cases, people do not utter what they intend to say directly and without preamble, but insinuate to others to express their thought indirectly and implicitly. We refer to this phenomenon as indirectness or implicitness of language use, which are relative with directness or explicitness of language. The strategies and means people use to avoid explicit language are various. In this paper, the author is going to conduct a preliminary research in pragmatic strategies for avoidance of explicit language and then analyze the various reasons for avoidance of explicitness in language from the perspective of pragmatics.

2. Pragmatic strategies to avoid explicit language

Actually, either direct (or explicit) expression means or indirect (or implicit) expression means, are use of language by people. Pragmatics is a discipline that specializes in how people employ graceful language for communication. According to the pragmatic perspective, all linguistic phenomena, including use of language, can be analyzed from the perspective of pragmatics. In the following, we are going to discuss how people avoid explicitness in language from the three perspectives of conversational implicature, presequences and hedges.

2.1 Conversational implicature

Conversational implicature, namely, “hidden meaning between the lines” and “an implied meaning” in its common sense, was put forward by Grice in 1967 for the first time to distinguish itself from the conventional implicature. According to Shen Xiaolong (2003: 177), conversational implicature does not refer to the literal meaning of a sentence studied by semantics, but implicature of the specific context in pragmatic study. He terms the former as “sentence meaning” and the latter as “utterance meaning”. When the two meanings are different, conversational implicature will appear. People often convey other hidden meanings more than literal meaning in conversation with one of the purposes to try to avoid explicitness in language. For instance, in (1):

A: Shall we go shopping this afternoon?

B: I have to finish my term paper.

From the literal meaning of the above conversation, A is offering a suggestion or making an invitation to B, but B does not accept or refuse directly. The answer of B violates on purpose the relevance maxim in the Cooperative Principle proposed by Grice, so the conversational implicature appears. Under such a circumstance, we (including Addresser A) should not come to understand meaning of B according to the sentence meaning of the conversation, but have to deduce the utterance meaning of B by reference to the context at that time and knowledge shared by the two parties of the conversation, namely, hidden meaning between the lines. As a matter of fact, the answer of B is indirect negation, amounting to “No, because I have to finish my term paper.” If we

make an analysis in such way, then it is possible that the answer of B can be acceptable. With reference to the context, we can deduce the actual intention for B to answer in such way: to avoid employing explicit language and to achieve the purpose of declining with thanks.

2.2 Presequences

From the angle of Speech Act Theory, presequences mean pre-sequence before an action. That is, before a speaker acts with words, he first verifies the facts by making inquiry so as to confirm whether he should conduct a certain speech act to the other party. Presequences are the most typical conversational structure mode for implementation of such “perlocutionary force” as “request”, “invitation” and “announcement” etc (He Ziran, 1988: 165). Thus, it mainly includes the following several types: “pre-requests”, “pre-invitations” and “pre-announcement”, etc. In Example (2):

a) Pre-request:

A: Are you going out tomorrow?

B: No. I have to finish my homework.

A: May I borrow your bike, then?

B: Sure.

b) Pre-invitation:

A: What are you going to do this weekend?

B: Nothing important. Why?

A: Let's go to visit Zhongshan Park.

c) Pre-announcement:

A: Do you know our boss' decision?

B: No. Anything important?

A: He has decided to trim the workforce.

From the above two examples, it is obvious that, the primary motive for an addresser to employ presequences is to try to find out whether there is any possibility to implement the speech acts of “request”, “invitation” and “announcement” to the addressee. In other words, the purpose of an addresser to employ presequences is to examine whether the speech act he is going to implement is of any value, and if there isn't any value, he can avoid that before he puts that into practice (Jiang Wangqi, 2003: 240). Besides, if the addresser is encountered with words too embarrassed to say, he can also resort to presequences to indirectly hint the other party so as to avoid speaking these words in a straightforward way. Therefore, from this perspective, presequences are quite similar to indirect speech act (Hu Zhuanglin et al, 1988: 282), which are both important means for avoidance of explicit language.

2.3 Hedges

According to definition by Lakoff (1972), hedges are words which make everything obscure. In daily communication, there exist quite a large number of hedges. On one hand, misuse of hedges might lead to pragmatic vagueness. On the other hand, rational application of hedges may be one means to implement pragmatic strategies in a great many contexts, which is helpful to realize ideal communicative effect. For instance, out of politeness, people often employ hedges, because they can be taken as a mitigatory means and their particular vagueness determines that the conversational implicature of the addresser is not conveyed directly and explicitly to the addressee. In Example (3):

A: Do you think I am qualified to be employed by your esteemed company?

B: It is said that your interview has failed.

In the above example, B adds the hedges “it is said that” before his statement. According to classification by some domestic scholars of hedges, “it is said that” belongs to “indirect attribution shields” (He Ziran & Chen Xinren, 2002: 150-151). The feature of hedges lies in the fact that, an addresser indirectly expresses his attitude towards or evaluation of a matter by means of quoting view of a third party. In the above example, in order to show consideration for the face of A and maintain the Politeness Principle, B does not directly express his opinion, but uses the indirect attribution shields of “it is said that”. In this way, he can alleviate and weaken the feeling of rigidity and indifference caused by direct refusal to the other party and it is more likely that the other party accepts his refusal.

3. Tentative analysis of reasons for avoidance of explicitness in language

Interpersonal activities of human kind are of great variety and requirements of human being on language are also various. On one hand, when people speak, they always intend others to understand what they say and wish to attain directly their pragmatic purpose with the most explicit method. No one would go out of his way to let others guess broken implicature and general utterance, because, firstly, this may make others painstaking, the addresser has to spend a lot of talking to express his meaning and the addressee has to boggle his brain to understand what has been said, which obviously does not conform to “the principle of least effort” and “principle of economy” in a conversation; secondly, there exists the risk of leading to misunderstanding, ambiguity and pragmatic vagueness, which may further cause communicative failure. However, on the other hand, during speech communication, most usages of an utterance are also indirect (Suo Zhenyu, 2000: 182). In most cases, the addresser takes an indirect means to realize successful communication. In the following, the author is going to discuss in detail several major reasons for people to avoid explicitness in language from such pragmatic perspectives of Politeness Principle, pragmatic parameter and adaptation theory.

3.1 Politeness Principle

Why do people often not directly choose words to convey their ideas in speech communication, but look their way and row another in an indirect way? Searle (1975) believed this is for consideration of politeness. Considering communicative principles, Grice (1975) pointed out, Cooperative Principle is an important principle people abide by in communication. However, the question is, why do people sometimes abide by the Cooperative Principle in communication, and sometimes violate this principle on purpose? One of the reasons is for consideration of politeness. Likewise, Cooperative Principle and Politeness are both guiding principles people ought to follow in a conversation except that the two play different roles. Cooperative Principle has the function of adjusting content of the conversation of speakers. By contrast, Politeness Principle has an adjustive effect with a higher level, because it maintains the equal status of the two parties involved in the conversation and their friendly relationship (He Zhaoxiong, 2000: 212). Therefore, if contradiction emerges between the Cooperative Principle and Politeness Principle, namely, competing goals proposed by Thomas, then people may even sacrifice the Cooperative Principle to maintain the Politeness Principle. In Example (4):

A: Can you lend me some money?

B: It is sunny today, isn't it?

In the above example, the answer by B seems to be irrelevant, because it violates the maxim of relation in Cooperative Principle, but it maintains well the Politeness Principle. It is for consideration of politeness and for consideration of the face of A that B does not refuse directly. All domestic scholars in this field all believe that politeness is one of the reasons for avoidance of explicitness in language. According to Xiong Xueliang (1999: 3), owing to certain social stipulation restraints, sometimes people can not express what they really intend to express with relatively straightforward words. For example, sometimes, even if people have words to say, they can not be as straightforward as they intend to be, which is for consideration of politeness or interpersonal relationship. He Zhaoxiong (2000: 218) also holds similar view on this. He believes, in most cases, degree of politeness is in line with degree of indirectness of the language. Thus, in many cases, people avoid explicit language just to better protect the Politeness Principle.

3.2 Pragmatic parameter

In pragmatics, “pragmatic parameter” refers to “factors that affect what sorts of utterance strategies people adopt for communication”. Thomas (1995: 124) summarized the following four factors: the relative power between the addresser and the addressee; the relative social distance between the addresser and the addressee; degree of imposition of a behavior concerned; the relative rights and obligations between the addresser and the addressee. In addition, a large number of other scholars have also been involved in research within this field. For example, Brown and Levinson (1978: 56-289) believed, in a lot of cultures (maybe in all cultures), estimation of a face threatening act can be referred to the former three factors mentioned above. In the following, we are going to conduct a brief analysis of the relation between the four factors and avoidance of explicitness in language.

3.2.1 Relative power

Generally speaking, in speech communication, the more different the social power of two parties concerned, the larger the possibility to use indirect language. For instance, if a superior wants to smoke, usually he does not speak to his subordinate in such a way, “Excuse me, sir. Would it be all right if I smoke?” Instead, it is probable that he says directly like this, “Mind if I smoke?” On the contrary, the subordinate tends to choose the former indirect utterance to implement his speech act.

3.2.2 Social distance

Social distance includes social status, age, gender and intimacy, etc. If two parties involved in a conversation are similar in such aspects of age, social class, employment type, gender and race, then they would use less indirect utterances in communication; otherwise, they would use more indirect utterance in communication. For example, in the case of a teacher, he would use indirect utterances with different degrees in his conversation with the headmaster, student, parents, children and wife, etc.

3.2.3 Imposition

Different degrees of imposition may also have influences upon selection of utterance strategies. Under the circumstance when other conditions are the same, the degrees of imposition are quite different in cases when one borrows one Yuan and 10,000 Yuan from others. The one who borrows may select different utterance strategies, and the latter requires more indirect, euphemistic and polite expression means than the former.

3.2.4 Rights and obligations

If an addresser believes that he has the right to require the addressee to do something and that the addressee also has the obligation to do something, then the utterance strategy of the addresser would be inclined to direct expression means. On the contrary, if the addresser doesn't believe that he has the right to require the addressee to do anything or that the addressee doesn't have the obligation to do anything, then the utterance strategy of the addresser would be inclined to indirect expression means. For example, when a teacher requires his students to finish their homework, he can express his thought in a direct way. However, when the teacher asks his students to purchase goods he promotes, then he has to take indirect and euphemistic expression means for the reason that relationship between rights and obligations of both interpersonal parties has taken changes.

3.3 Explanation of "Adaptation Theory" for avoidance of explicitness in language

People can, at their option, select different types of languages and different expression means according to different communicative purposes and communicative occasions. According to the author of this paper, it is, as a matter of fact, a sort of selection language for the two parties of a conversation to use explicit expression or implicit expression. According to Verschueren (1998: 58-63), selection of a language is due to the fact that language has a series of features, namely, the alternative possibility of language --- variability; this sort of selection is not mechanical and fixed, but is conducted on the basis of pragmatic principle and pragmatic strategies --- negotiability; choice made by a language user is to try to satisfy the need of communication --- adaptability. For instance, when one attempts to offer advice to a bombastic, eloquent and reckless friend, he is, actually, faced up with choices from the following expression means. In Example (5):

- a) You shouldn't shoot your mouth off.
- b) Hold your tongue! Don't be rash.
- c) Speaking without thinking is shooting without aiming.

Due to variability of language per se, a speaker is endowed with certain freedom in their selection of language. However, his selection has to follow some pragmatic principles (such as, cooperative principle and politeness principle) and pragmatic strategies (in order to take into consideration of the face of a friend, we have to avoid explicitness of language and adopt indirect and euphemistic expression means). When such interaction and negotiation exists between a speaker and his friend, then he will choose Sentence c), which best matches requirements of the context and comply with what the other party requires. Compared with the first two sentences, Sentence c) does not only employ rhetorical means with end rhyme, but also adopts the expression means which deviates from convention. In such way, the speaker adds the attention value and memory value of his utterance, which is likely to enable the addressee come to himself and be aware of his own disadvantage. Furthermore, what is most important, the expression means in Sentence a) and Sentence b) are straightforward and rigid, brimmed with preceptive and even imperative tone, unable to convince people genuinely. On the contrary, application of Sentence c) avoids explicitness of language. On the surface, it is stating a fact, but actually it is a sincere advice to his friend. It is believed that, the addressee can also come to realize the much thought of the addresser and accept and adopt his advice, sincerely convinced.

4. Conclusion

Through above analysis and demonstration, we have had an explicit idea, that is, indirect expression of language is a common occurrence in daily life and avoidance of explicitness of language often plays a crucial role in interpersonal communication. Indirect expression of language can not only avoid monotonousness and vapidness in straightforward communication, but also can be regarded as lubricant of linguistic communication,

maintaining the face of both parties involved in communication and establishing harmonious interpersonal relationship. With a view to this, it is quite necessary and useful to learn some strategies to avoid explicit language if one intends to be successful in communication. Of course, there are also quite a lot of other strategies for avoidance of explicitness of language. Reasons for people to adopt the above strategies are far more than what has been mentioned above, which all require further research and discussion in the future.

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