

Deliberate Misinterpretation of My Fair Lady and Its Pragmatic Analysis in Ironic Context

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyze the deliberate misinterpretation in ironical context and its pragmatic effects by the Relevance Theory. Deliberate misinterpretation is a usual communicative method in interpersonal communication. According to different context, there will be different pragmatic effects. During the process of communication, in order to realize some special goals, the speakers use some contexts and some ambiguous expressions to misinterpret others on purpose. In ironical context, the speakers' expressions are misinterpreted to satisfy some special purposes, which will make several pragmatic effects, including protecting self-images or face-saving, relax the atmosphere and avoid confliction.

Key words: Ironical context; Deliberate misinterpretation; Pragmatic analysis

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INTRODUCTION

As a main method of verbal communication, deliberate misinterpretation is a common communicative strategy. During the communication, in order to achieve their aims, speakers are inclined to use some special contexts and obscured expressions to misinterpret others' attentions, which could realize a certain communicative effects

(Brone, 2008; He, et al, 2004). In ironical context, speakers tend to achieve their communicative goals by misinterpreting others' words. *My Fair Lady* written by British dramatist Shavian in 1912 is filled with irony and very funny. Language in this work is humorous, discloses different kinds of social malpractice and irony the hypocrisy of the bourgeoisie spicily. The reason why this work is so popular for a long time is that the ironic conversation and characters' destiny are showed profoundly in this wok, which gives audience a sense of being refreshed and satisfied. Some old studies about *My Fair Lady* are mainly focus on sociolinguistics, and irony the society from the sight of characters' destiny. According to those works, people want to irony the hypocrisy, indifference and apathy of British upper class at that moment. This paper based on the ironic context study the pragmatic effects of the actual conversation between speakers by deliberate misinterpreting. The author analyses the conversations in this work to find the ironic attention and summarize the specific pragmatic effects.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

The traditional definition of Irony is that Aristotle refers to the definition of irony: words and referring are on the contrary, and it always means the situation of expressing contrary to what one think. In essence, irony is "the effect of objectification and situational effect in a specific cognitive context" (Xu, 2002, p.78). The cognitive context of relevance theory regards context as a psychological construction that develops for correct understanding words in the process of interaction. It is a hypothetical subset of the listeners' world. The irony is misstatement, and the hearers can grasp the implication and overtones according to different context, but its purpose is to get the hearer to understand the real intention of the speakers.

Deliberate misinterpretation is a common means of communication, and it is a communication strategy that

can be used in order to achieve a certain communicative purpose. It has three significant features: 1) it is based on the correct understanding of each other on the discourse; 2) it emphasizes the deliberate misinterpretation of the speaker's intention, that is to fully understand the speaker on the basis of the utterance, and deliberately distorted the meaning of others, which is a process of speakers' language regulation; 3) the speaker regards deliberate misinterpretation as a communicative strategy to reach a certain communicative purpose.

There are also many studies on deliberate misinterpretation at home and abroad. On the one hand, deliberate misinterpretation is regarded as a cognitive phenomenon, which is closely related to "incongruity". He Ziran and Shen Zhiqi (2004) proposed that the operational mechanism of deliberate misinterpretation lies in "intentionally violating the same law, leaving or changing the context". As for the implementation of such a "violation" or "inconsistency", Sun Ya (2005) thinks that the means to achieve deliberate misinterpretation include the ambiguity of language itself and the implicit and indirect use of language by listeners. Tian Chenxu (2011) divides the realization of deliberate misinterpretation into two types of ostensive and implied meaning. The former refers to the hearer by word polysemy, homophone and demonstrative ambiguity, deliberate choice and people express different meanings, so as to explain the meaning of song words; the latter refers to no agreement between the true literal meaning and pragmatic meaning to express the speaker's utterance. On the other hand, it is about the study of pragmatic functions. Tzanne (2000) uses "face strategy" to explain "intentional misunderstanding", which is a pragmatic strategy adopted by people to defend faces in the process of communication. Hearers pretend to be misunderstood and create a situation that threatens each other's face. He Ziran and Shen Zhiqi (2004) pointed out that DMI can achieve many functions: the maintenance of face, against the insult, creating humor, mediating conflict, breaking the deadlock, getting rid of the plight and establishing harmonious interpersonal relationship, avoiding adverse consequences and so on. But the study doesn't discuss exactly deliberate misinterpretation in different contexts.

Based on the ironic context, this paper uses deliberate misinterpretation to analyze some dialogues in *My Fair Lady*, and further studies the different pragmatic effects brought about by deliberate misinterpretation in the ironic context.

2. PRAGMATIC FUNCTION ANALYSIS OF DELIBERATE MISINTERPRETATION IN THE CONTEXT OF IRONY

Deliberate misinterpretation is a pragmatic strategy used by the interlocutor. When the speaker uses the language,

it always takes different language strategies according to the context and the needs of the speaker. The deliberate misinterpretation of some of the dialogues in *My Fair Lady* has the following pragmatic functions.

2.1 Face Maintenance

Face plays a very important role in interpersonal communication and real life. In order to maintain the face, people will take different ways of speaking to express their ideas. Through a proper strategy of face maintenance, interpersonal relationships can be adjusted to promote the interpersonal communication. There are many examples in the *My Fair Lady*. For example: in the scene about one bet, the flower girl Eliza initiative to pay for the linguist Professor Higgins to teach her to learn pronunciation. But Higgins did not want to teach her, he just wanted to record Eliza's wrong pronunciation to enrich their corpus. They both insist on their own ideas. At that time Colonel Pickering put forward a bet on the idea and Higgins was happy to accept Eliza's request.

Colonel Pickering's bet strategy succeeded in maintaining the face of both sides. Eliza didn't need to lose face to ask Higgins to pronounce herself. Higgins didn't lose his gentle manner, which made the communication go on smoothly.

When Professor Higgins deliberately made trouble for Elizabeth, Eliza deliberately misinterpreted the professor's words to keep her face, such as: Higgins: Should we ask this baggage to sit down or shall we just throw her out of this window?

Eliza: I won't be called a baggage. Not when I've offered to play like any lady.

Higgins use "little baggage" to refer to Eliza and what he expressed is not to welcome Eliza. Eliza deliberately misinterpreted his words. She thought "little baggage" means no respect for herself and deliberately emphasize that she is a lady who had pay for the pronounce lesson to maintain their face.

What's more, Eliza felt heartless and decided to give up. When she was ready to go out, Higgins took one piece of chocolate to attract Eliza.

Higgins: You have boxes of chocolate to eat every day and eat them every meal.

Eliza: I won't do that. I will eat if I need.

Higgins knew that Eliza lived in the bottom of society and delicious chocolate will be an arm lured her left. He told Eliza that she can eat chocolate every day. Eliza read the professor's words, and she thinks that Higgins said this is to let her stay here, but if she nodded, Higgins will think she left for those chocolate. So Eliza stressed that she did not eat chocolate every day in order to maintain his face.

2.2 Get Rid of Trouble and Relieve the Atmosphere

In some occasions of communication, the speaker is in a very awkward predicament for some reason. At this

time, in order to get rid of this awkward predicament or alleviate the embarrassing atmosphere, the speaker often interprets deliberately others' meaning to break the stalemate. There are some such pragmatic strategies in *My Fair Lady*. For example, when Higgins felt Eliza's good feeling to him, he deliberately misinterpreted his words.

Eliza: I come to care for you. Not to want you to make love with me and not forgetting the difference between us, but more friendly like.

Higgins: Of course, that's how I feel and how Pickering feels.

When Eliza shows her admiration to Higgins, Higgins he refer to Pickering's to get rid of this embarrassing situation, which relieved the atmosphere and made the topic change. In order to get herself out of the awkward predicament, Eliza had to pass by the topic they are talking:

Higgins: Would you like marry to Pickering?

Eliza: I would marry you if you ask me, and you are nearer with my age than he is.

Higgins: That is?

Eliza: ...That's not what I want now. Don't you think it is...

In the course of the argument with Higgins, Eliza accidentally revealed she is more willing to marry Higgins. But when Higgins asked again, because of the girl's shy psychology or the fear of rejection, Eliza deliberately changed the subject they are talking about. In order to get rid of the awkward the dilemma and release the atmosphere, she just want to end up the topic of discussion as soon as possible.

2.3 Avoid Conflict

In the process of communication among people, there will be some conflicts. If it is not handled properly, it will cause serious consequences. But if others are complaining or getting angry, we can avoid some conflicts and create a harmonious interpersonal relationship skillfully through the way of deliberate misinterpretation. For example, in the scene of *My Fair Lady*, Eliza's father came to ask for money when he heard that his daughter lived in Higgins'. Higgins had deliberately misinterpreted his words in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts and let him take her daughter away. In this way, Eliza's father's attitude has become more moderate, and they can sit down and solve the problem calmly.

And in another scene, Eliza behaves perfectly in the party and go back home delight. She thinks that Higgins should have praised her, but he only cares about his bet and constantly shows off to other people. Everyone here has been praised his perfect success. But Higgins ignored Eliza's existence and did not scruple her feelings. After the night, Eliza did not know where to go, and she was

suffering. It happened that Higgins returned to find his own slippers. Eliza feels that she is less important than his slippers, so she is very anger and erupting soon. But at this moment, Higgins did not want to have a clash with Eliza, so he said he was when very tired want to sleep to avoid conflicts and reduce an unnecessary quarrel.

In interpersonal communication, there will be some conflicts among people. It is a good policy of interpersonal communication to avoid conflicts skillfully. Deliberately misinterpreting other's words so as to avoid the conflict in communication is conducive to make interpersonal communication successful.

CONCLUSION

During the verbal communication, speakers sometimes choose other ways of communication to achieve some communicative effect, which is called a communication strategy, and deliberate misinterpretation is one of strategies. The dialogues in this play have a lot of deliberate misinterpretation, which will produce different pragmatic functions. Based on the theoretical basis of deliberate misinterpretation, this paper makes a further analysis of the pragmatic functions of deliberate misinterpretation through the study of script dialogues. It enables people to have a deeper understanding of *My Fair Lady*, deepen people's understanding of deliberate misinterpretation and help people choose appropriate language strategies in daily verbal communication, make the communication successful and establish good interpersonal relationships.

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