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Representing the cognitive construal of Chinese first-person singular reference in discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the Chinese first-person singular reference in discourse, and exhibit the complexity of its usage. Default Semantics is applied in the construal of Chinese first-person singular reference phenomenon taken as an act of communication. After analyzing the examples elicited from the Lancaster Chinese Corpus, we find that the discourse meanings of Chinese first-person singular pronoun *wǒ* are not limited to self-reference, a variety of additional or non-deictic meanings are conveyed by it in different contexts, and many non-deictic expressions can also be employed to convey self-referential meanings. The construal of Chinese first-person singular reference discourse meaning results from the interaction of pragmatics with grammar and semantics. Thus, the interface between semantics and pragmatics should be rethought with respect to specific language interpretation.

1. Introduction

With the theoretical development of post-Gricean pragmatics, determining the boundary between semantics and pragmatics and identifying their interface have aroused heated debates among scholars. Following Grice (1957, 1989), what is said is attributed to the domain of semantics, while what is implicated falls within the scope of pragmatic study. However, to ascertain "what is said", one has to resolve reference, fix deixis, disambiguate expressions (Grice, 1989) and unpack ellipsis and narrow generality (Levinson, 2000) which all involve pragmatic processes. Focusing on the delineation of what is said, theorists from minimalist and contextualist camps have taken different stances. Minimalists (Borg, 2004; Cappelen and Lepore, 2005) followed the formal semantics tradition and claim that pragmatic or contextual contribution is confined within limited context-sensitive elements, while contextualists claim that the sentential semantics underdetermines the proposition and there is pragmatic intrusion into what is said, and ending up with "explicatures" (Carston, 2004), or a "pragmatically enriched said" (Recanati, 2004). Differently, Bach (1999, 2012) tends to regard it as a middle level which he calls "impliciture", while Levinson (2000) sees this pragmatic intrusion as a kind of conversational implicature (generalized). A common view shared by most scholars is that there exists some type of meaning muddling between semantics and pragmatics and both minimalists and contextualists intend to claim this as their own. Slightly different from these meaning

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demarcations, Jaszczolt (1999a, 2005), who aligns herself with the contextualist camp, focuses on the processing of discourse meaning, and she holds that a model of linguistic meaning should reflect the efficiency and effectiveness of meaning construal. Inspired by Grice (1989)'s Modified Occam's Razor (senses are not to be multiplied beyond necessity), Jaszczolt (2005: 14) proposes the principle of "Parsimony of Levels" (levels of meaning should not be multiplied beyond necessity). She merges the outputs of various sources of information, including syntactic, semantic and pragmatic elements, into a single level of meaning representation in her Default Semantics (DS for short). This framework has been applied to the explanation of such topics as definite descriptions, proper nouns, belief reports (Jaszczolt, 1997, 1999b), presupposition, sentential connectives, number terms (Jaszczolt, 2005), temporality, modality (Jaszczolt, 2009, 2013) and conditionals (Elder and Jaszczolt, 2016), to name just a few. Jaszczolt (2013: 59) noticed that to self-refer in discourse, "one cannot rely absolutely on any marker of first-person reference", and "strategies used to convey first-person reference use diversified means and are used with a variety of intentions" (Jaszczolt 2013: 68). Thus, she claims the rigid deictic/non-deictic division of first-person reference is misleading. Acknowledging its theoretical innovation, we think that her claim should be further verified using other natural languages as data, such as Chinese.

In addition, on the side of Chinese research, little attention has been paid to the mechanism of construing first-person singular reference in terms of social, cultural and world knowledge defaults and pragmatic factors; since DS merges the outputs of different sources of information, the application of DS into the explanation of Chinese first-person reference is theoretically motivated and practically needed.

Personal pronouns are the grammatical forms for referring to the interlocutors in discourse. The Chinese first-person singular pronoun *wǒ* refers to the speaker in verbal communication, however other non-canonical expressions can also serve the function of self-reference in discourse. For example, descriptions like *gāo fù shuài* (tall rich and handsome) and nominals like *gōngzhǔ* (princess) can be used to refer to the speaker with extra discourse meanings. In addition, the Chinese first-person singular pronoun has extra non-deictic meanings like that of intensifying the ego and highlighting contrast, and even meaning potentials to refer to others in certain contexts. This complexity of Chinese first-person singular reference usage and its form-function asymmetry indicates that there exists an interaction of pragmatics with grammar which can be represented by the result of the processing of information coming from various sources called merger representation in Default Semantics.

2. Default Semantics

Default Semantics was first proposed by Jaszczolt (1997, 1999a, b) and has been elaborated in her ensuing publications (Jaszczolt, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2016). For Default Semantics, the research objective is not the semantics of sentence, but the semantics of acts of communication (Jaszczolt, 2005: 114). The compositionality is transferred one level up from the sentential level as noted in the original Frege's Principle (see Werning et al., 2012), to the merger representation (pragmaticized semantics) which models the result of the interaction between social, cultural and world knowledge defaults (SCWD), cognitive defaults (CD), combination of word meaning and sentence structure (WS), and even conscious pragmatic inference (CPI).

As a post-Gricean theory, Default Semantics is rooted in the semantics/pragmatics interface debate and sits in the contextualists camp. Contextualists like Levinson (2000), Carston (2004) and many others criticized Grice's (1989) distinction between what is said and what is implicated and assigned them to the domains of semantics and pragmatics respectively. They contend that there is no clear cut demarcation line between semantics and pragmatics because the sentence underdetermines the proposition according to the thesis of "semantic underdeterminacy" (Carston, 2004). In other words, the sentential semantics needs to be pragmatically enriched to result in a relevant proposition. Moreover, some types of meaning like conventional/generalized conversational implicature seem to cut across the semantic and pragmatic distinction for they do not belong to what is said, but they are conventional. In a similar fashion, this paper will argue that Chinese first-person singular reference is another candidate to blur the semantic and pragmatic distinction, which will be demonstrated in the ensuing analysis.

How is one to theorize about this overlapping meaning? Some contextualists regard it as an intermediate level of meaning, while others choose to widen what is said. "Bach and Levinson opt for the middle ground between what is said and what is implicated, although they derive this middle level from very different principles, whereas Carston, Sperber and Wilson, and Recanati subsumed this middle level under what is said" (Jaszczolt, 2002: 252). Taking a different path, Jaszczolt (2005) adopts the perspective of acts of communication, and aims to represent discourse meaning as a merger of the outputs of processing of information coming from various sources. In addition, for the different sources of information are on an "equal footing" (Jaszczolt, 2005: 8, 33, etc.), the logical form (the output of grammar), or "syntactic constraint" *à la* Jaszczolt, can be overridden by the output of other information processing (Jaszczolt, 2005: 58, 84, etc.).

DS takes Truth-Conditional Pragmatics (Recanati, 2004) and Discourse Representation Theory (Kamp and Reyle, 1993) as its two parent theories, and its aim is "to propose a way of accounting for utterance meaning that mirrors the speed and efficiency encountered in conversational practice" (Jaszczolt, 2005: 3). The latest version of the theory may be summarized as in the following diagram:

It should be noted that Fig. 1 is a processing model which is reproduced from the original information source model sketched in Jaszczolt (2005). In this revised model, different sources of information of merger representation are reclassified into five types: world knowledge (WK), word meaning and sentence structure (WS), situation of discourse (SD), properties of