

Analyses on Granny Liu's Dialogues in Light of Relevance Theory

Hongping Chen*, Xiaowan Lu

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, NO, 689 Road, North District, Baoding 071003, Hebei, China

***Corresponding author**

Hongping Chen

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Abstract: As one of Chinese four great classic novels, *A Dream of Red Mansions*, which is considered as the encyclopedia of feudal society, is of great value to be studied. Up to now, most researches mainly focus on the translation, cultural and pragmatic fields. When it comes to the investigation on the dialogue in this works, most researches just center on the leading roles in the novel. Whereas, attention paid to the subordinate figures such as Granny Liu. Taking Granny Liu's typical dialogues extracted from the English version of *A Dream of Red Mansions* translated by famous translator Yang Hsien-yi as corpus, this thesis launched an exploration on how the subordinate figures Granny Liu carried out communication in the three aspects of RT respectively including the ostensive-reference process, context and cognitive environments, and the optimal relevance. Surely, this analysis can exert favorable influence on readers to evaluate Granny Liu more comprehensively and objectively, and also nudges readers to appreciate the exquisite and superb artistic charm of this novel and digest the writer's creation intension. Meanwhile, this analysis is of substantial benefit to expand the research objective and field about Relevance Theory.

Keywords: Dialogue; Relevance Theory; context; ostensive-inferential process; optimal relevance.

INTRODUCTION

A Dream of Red Mansions, as one of Chinese four great classic novels, is of great value to be studied by many researchers from different aspects. It is universally acknowledged that the writer of the masterpiece is accomplished in creating numerous impressive characters especially through his eximious depiction of dialogues. Admittedly, dialogues matter a lot to some extent if anyone is interested in the analysis of characters and the artistic value of this classic novel.

RT (Relevance Theory) explains that communication is relevance-oriented from the speaker's ostensive acts and the speaker's inferential acts. From the angle of RT, many scholars have discussed the book in the translation, cultural, pragmatics branch and so on. However, few attentions were paid to some less showy figures like Granny Liu. Hence, taking Granny Liu's dialogues in the English version as corpus, On one hand, this study aims to study *A Dream of Red Mansions* from a new and meaningful angle and provide more hopeful opinions for the debated discussions on the characters and themes in the novel. On the other hand, this paper is expected to prove the RT as a forceful thought in the concrete analyses of the excerpt dialogues.

LITERATURE VIEW

As a humble poor countryside relative of the Jia's family, Granny Liu plays an indispensable part in the novel. With different purposes, she paid three visits altogether to the Rongguo Mansion, witnessing the extravagance of the landlord class in the late Qing Dynasty and the Jia family's whole process from prosperity to decline. Due to the fact that bad weather brought about the poor harvest, Granny Liu paid her first visit, aiming to get some financial assistance from the Jia's family. Later, on her second visit, she prepared some fresh vegetables and fruits to thank and please Jia family and luckily received several slap-up goods. The third time Jia's family was declined, Granny Liu came to his assistance to rescue Wang Hsi-feng's daughter being sent out.

Present studies on the dialogues in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

The novel is distinguished for the profundity of its thoughts and the richness of its messages. investigations of previous researchers are conducted in the three major domains: the translation field, the cultural field, and the pragmatics field.

Gao Wenxi [1] explored out what the translator need to consider and how to cope with the problems if

the translation works can achieve the ideal effect of portraying and shaping a unique person. Gao Junzi [2] projected a study of the artistic charisma of Chinese cultural and tradition in the folklore angle in this magnificent masterpiece. Liang [3] explored the main figures in the novel from the perspective of Relevance Theory. Those related studies mainly focus on the figure of the speech in the works based on RT or concentrate on the popular spot of plots and roles in the perspective of other theories.

RELEVANCE THEORY

Communication is used to convey information, emotion, thought, attitude and opinion. But, the successful communication still remains to be studied. Relevance theory was formally proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986 [4]. In light of the cognition study, the researchers of RT tried to make an investigation on the philosophy questions of human being's verbal communication and the psychological questions of human being's mental process in verbal communication. According to Blakemore [5], in a particular situation of utterances, the hearer is aimed to discovering the intention expressed by the speaker through the contextual clues and his own linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge.

Ostensive-referential communication

The authors of RT agree with Grice that communication is not simply a matter of encoding and decoding, it also involves reference. From the speaker's side, communication should be considered as an act of making clear of one's intension to express something. This behavior is called Ostensive Act. Roughly speaking, a complete communication is that it is ostensive-inferential [6]. According to RT, communication is defined as an ostensive-inferential process: for the speaker, it is a process of ostension in which the speaker informs the hearer through his utterance not only of informative intension but also of communicative intension; while for the hearer, communication is a process of inference in which the hearer combines the speaker's informative intension with relevant contextual assumptions, gains contextual effect and finally draws comprehension of the speaker's communicative intention.

The context and cognitive environment

Since the ostensive-inference process is discovered, the inference process remains to be delved into exhaustively for further more professional study. Certainly, the context and cognitive environment, ranked the first place in researching effective inference during the fluent and successful communication process.

An individual's total cognitive environment is the set of all the facts that he can perceive or infer: all the facts that are manifest to him. Context is also called

"contextual assumptions" in RT; the environment which is known by both the speaker and the hearer is called "mutual cognitive environment". Contextual effects (also called cognitive effects) refer to the relationship between the information presented by utterance and context [7]. Context, as it is called, refers to the environment of language and it exerts influence on language communication. Later J. R. Firth developed it and believed that context consists of not only language context but also situational context. Then again Halliday [8] inherited and further probed into it.

Optimal relevance

In verbal communication, in view of economic rules, human beings are more predisposed to automatically pursue the maximal context effect through the slightest inference called the optimal relevance. Gutt believed that human expected that the hearer attempting at interpreting the speaker's utterances would generate adequate contextual effects at minimal process cost [9]. That is to say, the addressees are accessible to comprehend the addressor's connotation to the utmost extend by means of the minimal efforts in the given dynamic cognitive environment and context. Since the basic main procedures of communication have been expounded in light of RT in the previous parts, this part comes to the discussion of the final objective of RT—the optimal relevance.

Analyses on Granny Liu's Dialogues in the Light of Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory takes a fresh perspective to the research on the process of verbal communication with the basic assumption of human being cognitive. And the dialogue between Granny Liu and others in the two visits on Rong Mansion were critical to deepen our understanding of the unobtrusive character and the whole work's artistic value. Consequently, this dissertation is laid out to explore the dialogues of the communication in Granny Liu's two visits in the light of RT.

The analyses on the dialogues in ostensive-referential communication

On the first visit to Jia Mansion, Granny Liu had to turn to financial help because his grandson was reduced to hard conditions. Though Granny Liu felt ashamed to beg for help, she took up courage to speak out her intensions, and luckily she gained the help from Wang Xi-feng. How did she make it by the ostensive-inference communication?

1) After a short exchange of polite inquiries, she asked Granny Liu (A) whether she just happened to be passing or had come with any special object." (B) "I came specially to see you, sister, and also to inquire after Her ladyship's health. If you could take me to see her, that would be nice. If you can't, I'll just trouble you

to pass on my respects." This gave Mrs. Zhou a shrewd idea of the reason for her visit [10].

Realizing that Jia family was luxurious and illustrious, as a so-called relative without much connection, Granny Liu came to Jia's family and just hoped to have a shot at begging for economic aid. At the beginning, Sterward Zhou Rui entertained her. Knowing Granny Liu's relationship with Jia family, Sterward Zhou Rui enquired about Granny Liu's arrangement of this visit. (A) are ostensive words that indicate Zhou Rui's being guessing at this special relative's intension. Granny Liu perceived Zhou Rui's hint words since they hadn't been in contact for a long time, promptly inferring Zhou Rui's implying meaning according to the common sense. In (B) Granny Liu replied Zhou Rui's question and indirectly manifested her true purpose for this visit. So, Zhou Rui surmised that Granny Liu's demand for seeing second mistress was purposive instead of simple and kind concerns on second mistress, certainly inferring the facts that Granny Liu might implore second mistress for some straits. Taking into consideration that the family of Granny Liu once bestowed help to the family of Lady Wang, Zhou Rui decided to let Zhou Rui see second mistress.

In above dialogues, when being the speaker, Granny Liu picked out ostensive signal or stimulus in her utterances to inform the hearer her informative as well as communicative intension; while as the hearer, Granny Liu made relevant inference of the hearer combining contextual assumptions, and obtained contextual effect and finally reached comprehension of the speaker's communicative intention. In conclusion, in the whole course of dialogue, Granny Liu achieved her goal through a successful ostensive-inferential communication. As is indicated, Second mistress, Wang Hsi-feng, as the general manager of the whole Jia family, was social, hypocritical, and astute. Whereas, Granny Liu presented the characteristics- courage and intelligence.

The analyses on the dialogues in the context and cognitive environment

After the first visit, Granny Liu has got through the hard times with the money from Jia's family. This time Granny Liu's crops harvested and life got improved, so she brought some fresh vegetables and the fruits to repay the relatives in Jia's family to have a taste on her second visit. However, on this time, Granny Liu should have received the chance to experience the daily life of Jia's family for two days.

1) (A) "You young ladies must be tired of the delicacies you eat every day, and you may care to try our country fare. This is just our poor way of showing our gratitude."

Pinger thanked her for her trouble and asked her to take a seat.

Concluding that this was the Lady Dowager, the old woman stepped forward, smiling, and curtsied to her.

(B) "Greetings, Goddess of Long Life!" she cried.

(C) "So old, yet so hale and hearty! Why, you're older than I am by several years. If I live to your age, I doubt whether I shall be so spry."

(D) "We're born to put up with hardships, madam, and you to enjoy good fortune," replied Granny Liu with a smile. "If we were all like you, who'd do the farming?" [10].

In RT, context means that the environment of language and influence it imposes on language communication. On the context that the masters in Jia's family were accustomed to the fish and meat, So, Granny Liu obtained the assumption that masters are prone to favor the wild and fresh fruits and vegetables. (A) demonstrates that she had attained the objective to express his thanks to the Jia's family's help naturally. Accidentally, the next day falls on Dowager Jia's birthday, which is known to all. So, by the way, Granny Liu greeted Dowager Jia with (B), catering to Dowager Jia -the Longevity Star high spirits. For receiving the wish from others, Dowager's delighted spirits was ignited. (C) appeared irrelevant and casual, and Granny Liu could reply with any words. However, context, in most cases, emphasizes the ability of inference. Granny Liu guessed out or inferred what Dowager Jia sought for. Granny Liu was undertaken to continue to please Dowager Jia. (D) which were proper words reflecting Granny Liu's status and psychology, instantly seized the Dowager Jia's heart. So, that both the addressor and the addressee interpreted the latent meaning was acquired, which means the accomplishment of effective and favorable context effects.

Conceited Dowager Jia harvested tremendous content and joy in the communication with Granny Liu in unrestrained manners. This gaily atmosphere can evoke a second thought about the blazing contrast between extravagant life in the upper feudal bureaucratic family and the industrious low class's hard condition.

The analyses on the dialogues in optimal relevance

This part's corpus follows the above part's corpus. On the next day in Jia's family, On the point of the dinner, the servant deceived Granny Liu as a guest must say a joke at the beginning of the dinner. Later, Granny Liu tackled the poser and later even made the literary couplets, which set off unanimous laughs and praises. How did Granny Liu easily achieve successful contextual effect in terms of optimal relevance?

1) Granny Liu stood up then and declaimed at the top of her voice:

(A) "Old woman Liu, I vow,

*Eats more than any cow,
And down she settles now,
To gobble an enormous sow."
Then she dried up abruptly, puffing out her cheeks and
staring down at her bowl.
(B) "Even your hens here are refined," she remarked,
"laying such tiny, dainty eggs as these. Well, let me
'fuck' one of them."
This caused a fresh outburst of laughter.
"They cost one tael of silver each. Better try one while
they're hot."
(C) "A tael of silver!" Granny Liu sighed. "And gone
without a sound." The others had long since stopped
eating to watch her antics [10].*

In effective communication, an assumption is relevant to an individual when the context is available to that individual at that time. Besides, the context rests with the assumption to process it. Granny Liu understood the context that everybody and everything today should revolve around the entertainment of celebrating the birthday of Dowager Jia. So (A) did win everyone's heart and laughter, since her words fully fitted his status and the table situations. After that episode, people began to have the dinner. Granny Liu made newfangled comments on small egg in (B), which could result that others ridiculed on her at once according to her narrow horizon and social position. Without much processing efforts, the effect of Granny Liu's joking others was attained and the optimal relevance were followed. For more fun, Hsi-feng stressed that an egg counts one penny, wondering how Granny Liu responded. Regretfully, Granny Liu failed to have eaten out the expensive egg. Then Granny Liu seemed so disappointed and amused everybody for his reluctance and the grief in (C). Granny Liu combined context in the table scene and her own knowledge to proactively create self-mockery jokes to please the Dowager in the optimal relevance.

In those situations, Granny Liu was not as coarse, ignorant and silly as the conventional views argued any more. She could cope with manifolds situations and genuinely switched her utterances for successful communication. Every time she spoke, she could express lucidly herself to produce presumptive effect according to dynamic context especially the existing reaction of listeners.

CONCLUSIONS

From the perspective of the three sides of RT, this thesis has launched a careful exploration on the typical dialogue in Granny Liu's two visits. When it comes to perceiving the ostensive utterance and inferring the intension of the speaker in communication, Granny Liu was seen as proficient at employing this strategy to realize her communication purposes. So her first visit ended up with fair harvest. While in her second visits, noticing the context that Dowager Jia was

to celebrate her birthday, Granny Liu was clever to express her admiring for Dowager Jia's rich life in the dialogue, which contented Dowager Jia's vanity. In the route of trolling the garden, Granny Liu combined the dynamic environment and cognitive environment drawing corresponding replies to entertain people in her rural perspective and continued to act as an ignorant countrywomen since people around reacted were amused. On the literary couplets, Granny Liu gave full performance of her wit. Since everyone could easily get tickled, which the maximal context effect is achieved through the minimal processes efforts. That is the optimal relevance in communication.

On a macroscopic view, in the dialogue of Granny Liu two visits on Jia family, not only the old countrywoman's traits and image appeared in our minds, but also the author's laudatory attitude towards the massive laboring people is indicated, thus conjunctively disclosing the strict hierarchy and appallingly tremendous gap between the upper bureaucrat class and the low laboring people in the increasingly declining feudal dynasty. Hence, to some degree, Relevance Theory can be considered as a practical and efficient vehicle for us to comprehend the writer's conversation's veritably arrangement and purpose about the figures and the artistic value. In the other hands, RT could be expanded with more fresh and unique contents.

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