

Analysis of Fictional Conversations Based on Pragmatic Adaptation

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Abstract—The present study will take pragmatic adaptation proposed by Jef Verschueren as its theoretical foundation to approach fictional conversations. According to the theory of pragmatic adaptation, every unique linguistic and extra-linguistic choice made by speakers in the process of conversation, whether consciously or not, will certainly make special stylistic effects. The pragmatic adaptation theory studying all levels of language provides a new perspective and framework to analyze the language of fictional conversations on the basis of social, cultural and cognitive contexts.

Index Terms—fictional conversations, pragmatic adaptation

I. INTRODUCTION

Fictional conversation taking language as its medium embodies the interpersonal communication in literary world which takes reality as the basis. In fictional conversation, language users or characters in fiction, like people in daily life, also have their different personalities, thoughts, psychological activities and so on. They live in the literary world, hold various professions, have their social interactions and are frequently affected by their surroundings when they are engaged in verbal communication with one another. In literary works, characters are performing the kind of speech acts that are appropriate to the specific situations with all the fictional felicity conditions as people do in naturally occurring conversations. When one reads a fiction, the speaker “I” is not usually taken as the author but as the one who lives in the created reality of the fiction. It frequently occurs to one that the differences between writing and speaking have so great impacts on the differences between written and spoken texts that many people tend to overemphasize the gap and ignore the commonness between them. But it is not the case on second thoughts. In fictional written conversations, pragmatic particles such as “you know” and “kind of”, repetition, hesitation and ungrammaticality occur frequently, which is similar to spoken conversations. Therefore, oral language and literary language are not mutually exclusive types. Therefore, the pragmatic approach to styles of fictional conversations is not only valid but also of great practical and theoretical significance. It enables analysts to approach texts as objects situated in the real world rather than as independent aesthetic artifacts. No account of literary work will be complete without an account of literary communication between fictional characters in context. A better understanding of the developmental processes of fictional plots can be obtained since the contextual elements which greatly influence plot development are fully considered. When pragmatic factors are paid due attention to, more systematic, more explicit and more convincing interpretations of the literary works as well as of the writers will be achieved. It also sheds light on the historical, cultural, social and mental states of the particular phase when the literary work was written.

Given what has been discussed above, the present study will adopt the theory of pragmatic adaptation to study fictional conversations. It concentrates on how different speakers choose various linguistic elements and adapt to various contextual factors in order to meet the communicative needs and achieve the ideal effects.

II. PRAGMATIC ADAPTATION

The theory of pragmatic adaptation is proposed by Jef Verschueren from a brand new perspective. He holds the opinion that “pragmatics does not constitute an additional component of a theory of language, but it offers a different perspective” (1999: 2). In other words, the study of language use can be situated at any level of structure including morpheme, syntax, semantics and so on. The pragmatic perspective is also closely related to cognition, society and culture. It can be specified that pragmatics is “a general cognitive, social, and cultural perspective on linguistic phenomena in relation to their usage in forms of behavior” (1999: 7).

According to Verschueren, using language consists of “the continuous making of choices, consciously or subconsciously, for language-internal (i.e. structural) and/or language-external reasons” (1999: 55-56). That is to say, whenever a language user enters the dynamic process of verbal communication, he or she is under an obligation to make choices. Choices are made at every possible level both linguistically and extra-linguistically. And more often than not, choice-making at different levels is simultaneous. Speakers do not only choose forms, but also communicative strategies. That is, they can express a certain idea or perform a certain speech act through various linguistic forms, but they only choose to use the one that can realize their communicative needs in a specific situation to achieve the goal of

adaptation to context. Not only the speaker makes choices in the process of production, but also the hearer does in the process of interpretation. Both types of choice-making are of equal importance for the smooth flow of communication. However, not all choices, whether in production or interpretation, are made with equal consciousness: some choices are made consciously while others are made subconsciously. Therefore, due to the different degrees of consciousness, some choices are marked while others are unmarked.

III. PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF FICTIONAL CONVERSATION

A. Choice and Adaptation of Words

A word is a unity of sound and meaning (Lin Chengzhang, 1997: 51). The relationship between the sound and the meaning of the majority of words is considered to be conventional. In other words, why a word has this or that meaning is not prescribed but a convention. Obviously, traces of human thinking are deeply imprinted on meanings of words. There may be different terms to name the same thing, but every term will have its unique effects.

Common words accounting for the majority of English vocabulary refer to those that can be used on almost all occasions (Lin Chengzhang, 1997: 60). They belong to the basic word level of English words and can be used on either formal or informal occasions. Nouns such as father, mother, river, field or room, verbs such as see, let, live, go or drink, adjectives such as red, good, small, week or round and adverbs such as happily, quickly, quiet, rather or hard belong to this category.

Informal words are usually classified into three categories: colloquialisms, slang words and vulgarisms (Lin Chengzhang, 1997:60-61). The phenomena of ungrammaticality always go along with informal words on informal occasions. Formal words are usually used in books, newspapers, documents, serious speeches and so on. Obviously they are used on formal occasions between speakers whose relationships are not so close; however, under certain circumstances they will also appear in conversations between those who are in intimate relationships for certain purposes.

Two examples will be presented to explore how speakers choose common words, informal words and formal words in different contexts to suit different communicative needs.

Conversation one:

"Honey, I gotta talk to you."

"Sure. Is something wrong?" She put her book down.

"Well, sort of. Yes."

... ..

"Bob," she said with candor, "something in your voice scares me. Have I done anything?"

"No. It's me. I've done it." Bob took a breath. He was shaking, "Sheila, remember when you were pregnant with Paula?"

"Yes?"

"I had to fly to Europe----Montpellier----to give that paper..."

"And...?"

"I had an affair." He said it as quickly as he could.

... ..

"No. this is some terrible joke. Isn't it?"

"No. It's true," he said tonelessly. "I---I'm sorry."

"Who?" she asked.

"Nobody," he replied. "Nobody special."

"Who, Robert?"

"Her---her name is Nicole Guirin. She was a doctor." Why does she want to hear these details?

"And how long did it last?"

"Two, three days."

"Two days or three days? I want to know."

"Thee days," he said. "Does all this matter?"

"Everything matters," Sheila answered.

This conversation is an excerpt from the fiction *Man, Woman and Child* by Erich Segal. Robert and Sheila are a happy couple who are well educated. The physical context is that Robert who loves his wife deeply had a love affair with a French doctor several years ago. And the French doctor gave birth to a boy who is nine years old when the conversation occurs, which was told to Robert by a friend just now. Therefore, Robert is facing the dilemma of whether he should tell the truth to his wife because the boy is going to live in orphanage due to the death of the French doctor. At the same time, Robert does not want to hurt his wife who has always been loving him so deeply.

Words used in the conversation are very common, which is determined by the contexts, both physically and psychologically. The husband chooses common words in order to obtain forgiveness from his wife and the wife does so in order get the complete truth from her husband. In the beginning, Robert chooses "...gotta to talk..." rather than "...have to talk..." for two reasons. Firstly, the relationship between them is husband and wife, so there is no need to be so formal. Secondly, Robert tries his best to create the easy atmosphere and put both of them at ease. Then, the wife

asks “Is something wrong?” in stead of “Is anything wrong?” This is because that “something” implies the wife’s expectation. To put it in another way, the wife expects something will happen. The husband uses the phatic word “well” and the vague phrase “sort of” to make a reply in order to mitigate the seriousness of the matter. The conversation moves until the husband tells his wife about his “affair” rather than “love affair”. The choice of the word “affair” and the omission of “love” show the husband’s guilt to Sheila and the pain resulted from his extra-marital affair. After Sheila’s temporary shock, she clearly and definitely chooses one word “who” to seek the absolute truth of the matter. Finally, when the husband tells her it only lasts “two, three days”, she again continues to go after the definite answer by repeating the word “days” in “two days or three days”. It can be clearly seen that all these common words are not chosen at random but influenced by their mental world and physical context. The couple constantly adapts their choices to their needs to achieve their own purposes.

Conversation two:

“Noblest—dearest—tenderest wife!” cried Aylmer, rapturously, “Doubt not my power. I have already given this matter the deepest thought—thought which might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself. Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science. I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph, when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect, in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be.”

“It is resolved, then,” said Georgiana, faintly smiling,--“And, Aylmer, spare me not, though you should find the birth-mark take refuge in my heart at last.”

This conversation is an excerpt from Hawthorne’s story *The Birth-mark*. The husband in the conversation is a devoted scientist proficient in every branch of natural sciences and the wife is beautiful and submissive to her husband. Apparently, the majority of the words chosen intentionally by the husband belong to formal ones. Adjectives like “noblest”, “tenderest”, “fully”, “competent”, and “beloved”; nouns like “triumph” and “ecstasy”; and verbs like “enlighten” and “render” all give the sense of elegance and formality. These formal and big words serve perfectly to show the rigidity and preciseness of a scientist. The birth-mark on the cheek of the scientist’s wife does not obscure her beauty. But the husband, out of his devotedness and commitment to natural science, is determined to do experiment to remove the birth-mark considered as a stain by him, regarding his wife as the testing object. Even he himself could not guarantee the success of the experiment. Naturally the experiment is finished at the expense of the death of the wife. Readers may wonder why the insignificant birth-mark deserves so many grand and elegant words from the husband after first reading. It is just by the deliberate choice of these “beautiful” words that the darker side of human beings is displayed. The pursuit of natural sciences is given priority over the priceless life of a person. It also reflects the alienation of human beings in that period of history.

Literary authors are one of the groups working with language and they often take advantage of the fuzziness or vagueness of language to reinforce certain effects in their works. Vague words can be classified into various kinds. There are words suggesting approximation such as “about”, “around”, “so”, “or”, or “around”; quantifiers such as “loads of”, “a mass of”, “some”, “many”, “several” or “few”; and words referring to something indefinite such as “anything”, “something”, or “nothing”(Joanna Channell, 1994: 42-157). In daily life, a lot of adverbs such as “very”, “extremely” or “quiet” are, to some degree, also vague words.

People hold different attitudes towards vague language. On the whole, there appear to have been two contradictory points of view. One is that vague language is a bad thing and the other is that it is a good thing. Neither of the two views have done justice to vague language. Vague words may appear to be imprecise and indefinite, although they perform their functions in various contexts. The use of vague language may just give the right amount of information, deliberately withhold information, show the power or politeness of speakers or reflect the atmosphere. The following examples will show how speakers choose vague words in different situations and will give a comparison of the different effects of the choice of vague and precise words.

“Oh! my dear Mr. Bennet,” as she entered the room, “we have had a most delightful evening, a most excellent ball. I wish you had been there. Jane was so admired, nothing could be like it. Every body said how well she looked; and Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful, and danced with her twice. Only think of that my dear; he actually danced with her twice; and she was the only creature in the room that he asked a second time. First of all, he asked Miss Lucas. I was so vexed to see him stand up with her; but, however, he did not admire her at all: indeed, nobody can, you know; and he seemed quite struck with Jane as she was going down the dance. So, he enquired who she was, and got introduced, and asked her for the two next. Then, the two third he danced with Miss King, and the two fourth with Maria Lucas, and the two fifth with Jane again, and the two sixth with Lizzy, and the Boulanger ---”

“If he had had any compassion for me,” cried her husband impatiently, “he would not have danced half so much! For God’s sake, say no more of his partners. Oh! that he had sprained his ankle in the first dance!”

“Oh! my dear,” continued Mrs. Bennet, “I am quite delighted with him. He is so excessively handsome! and his sisters are charming women. I never in my life saw any thing more elegant than their dresses. I dare say the lace upon Mrs. Hurst’s gown ---”

This conversation which is an excerpt from *Pride and Prejudice* occurs between Mrs. Bennet and Mr. Bennet after the ball in the Netherfield Park where Mr. Bingley resides. Mrs. Bennet is happily relating what have happened in the ball

to her husband. Obviously, most of the modifying words used by Mrs. Bennet belong to vague ones. At first, she uses the word “most” twice to modify “delightful” and “excellent”, but the general word “most” can not exactly show the degree of delightfulness and excellence. When she wants to express that Jane, her daughter, is admired by other guests at the ball, she just uses the word “so”. The word “quite” occurs twice when Mrs. Bennet relates Bingley’s feeling towards Jane. The first time is that “Mr. Bingley thought her quite beautiful” and the second occurrence is that “he seemed quite struck with Jane”. After her husband replies her impatiently, she continues to choose the word “quite” to express how she is delighted with Bingley whom she wants to be her son-in-law. After that, there appear such general words like “excessively”, “charming” or “thing” in Mrs. Bennet’s utterances. The so many vague words used by Mrs. Bennet are not chosen without motivation. On the contrary, these choices are made due to the need of character portraying. These words are chosen, on the one hand, to show that Mrs. Bennet lacks good education, on the other hand, to portray Mrs. Bennet as a vulgar housewife who is empty-headed and who likes to exaggerate. They also lead the readers to think what the kind of life would be to live with such a wife and mother.

B. Choice and Adaptation of Sentences

As far as fictions are concerned, sentences are combinations of lexicons according to grammatical rules by the authors with certain motives and purposes. Therefore, the writers’ psychological states, understanding of language and their creativity are deeply involved in the choices of sentences (Liu Anhai, 1995: 22). In literary discourse, the formation of sentences does not necessarily agree with grammatical rules due to the authors’ pursuits of aesthetic effects. Writers can, and do, play tricks when combining words into sentences in literary creation (Laura Wright and Jonathan Hope, 1996: 93). In the fictional conversations, sentences of various types will occur and will reflect the dynamic progression of literary communication among characters.

The length of sentences in literary works, on most occasions, will catch the attention of stylistic analysts. Generally speaking, the occurrences of short sentences are more frequent than those of long sentences in the fictional conversations. Short sentences give the impression of directness, brevity and forcefulness. The effect is especially obvious when a series of short sentences are used one after another. However, the frequent use of short sentences is likely to make the interaction incoherent.

Long sentences are usually used for special purposes if they do occur in conversations. They can make statements or opinion clear and explicit with no room for misinterpretation. But they may also strike readers with a redundant, repetitious or monotonous effect if the conversation is cluttered up with long sentences. The following examples will illustrate the communicative effects produced in the fictional conversations due to the choices of short and long sentences.

“I wish I hadn’t told you,” he said.
 So do I, she thought. “Why did you tell me, Bob?”
 “I don’t know.”
 “You do, Bob. You do!” Her fury was erupting. Because she knew now what he wanted from her.
 “It’s the child,” she said.
 “I—I’m not sure,” he said. “Yeah,” he admitted. “I do. I can’t explain it, but I feel I should do something to help. Find an alternative to—you know, sending him away. Maybe if I flew there...”
 “To do what? Do you know anyone who’d take him in? Do you even have a plan?”
 “No, Sheila. No, I don’t.”
 “Then what’s the point of flying over?”

 And then she staggered him.
 “I guess there’s only one solution, Robert. Bring him here.”
 He stared at her in disbelief. “Do you know what you’re saying?”
 She nodded. “Isn’t that really why you told me?”
 He wasn’t sure, but he suspected she was right. Again. “Could you bear it?”
 She smiled sadly. “I have to, Bob. If I don’t let you try to help him now, you’ll blame me someday for allowing your—your child to be put in an orphanage.”
 “I wouldn’t...”
 “Yes, you would. Do it, Bob, before I change my mind.”

This conversation is a continuation of the first example in *A. Choice and Adaptation of Words*. The love affair between Robert and the French doctor produces a boy whom is being talked about between Sheila--Robert’s wife, and Robert. Throughout the conversation, all the sentences used by both Sheila and Robert are comparatively short except for the one sentence chosen by Sheila. But in choosing short sentences, the husband and the wife are preoccupied with different beliefs and ideas. Also these short sentences will help the communicators to find the solution of how to deal with the child as soon as possible. The length of the sentences in this conversation echoes the urgency of the matter concerned.

Sheila has completely been informed of the love affair by her husband so far. At present she gets the upper hand in the flow of the conversation. She keeps it in mind that Robert should not leave her and the problem of the child should be dealt with immediately. So she resolutely tells her idea to Robert. Every short sentence makes her intension clear-cut

and explicit. The three consecutive short sentences---“To do what? Do you know anyone who’d take him in? Do you even have a plan?”---efficiently compel her husband to abandon the thought of flying to France. When she has made the final decision concerning the problem, she chooses a three-word sentence---“Bring him here”. The brief sentence almost makes it impossible for the husband not to agree with the wife. The wife also uses one long sentence, that is, “If I don’t let you try to help him now, you’ll blame me someday for allowing your—your child to be put in an orphanage.” This is an explanation for why the wife wants Robert to bring the child home. It is necessary to enable Robert to understand that Sheila still loves him and that she does not intend to split with him. So the long sentence provides sufficient information concerning Sheila’s love to her husband.

At the same time, Robert also chooses short sentences in the dialogue. It is because he is at a loss as to what to do with the child. He is turning to his wife for suggestions. Meanwhile he feels guilty for his wife and also sorry for the child. The more he says, the more trouble he might bring to the family as well as the child. For him, finding an immediate solution to the problem is the foremost thing he should do. So it is better to say less than to say more for the husband. The sentences used in this conversation are the best choices to adapt to the social world, the physical world and the psychological world of the wife and the husband. In other words, they are chosen for the purpose of achieving the goals of the couple and fulfilling their communicative tasks.

IV. CHOICE AND ADAPTATION OF CONVERSATION BUILDING PRINCIPLES

A. *Introduction to Conversation Building Principle*

Utterance building involves not only choosing linguistic units such as words or sentences and speech acts but also choosing utterance building principles (Jef Verschueren, 1999: 134). Utterance building principles are similar to strategies and methods adopted by speakers in order to make their interactions coherent and relevant. In the framework of Jef Verschueren’s pragmatic adaptation, three types of utterance building are proposed: sentential utterance building, suprasentential utterance building and utterance clusters building (1999:136-143). The first type involves the arrangement of given and old information, and theme (or topic) and theme (or comment); the second type involves the establishment of discourse topics; and the third type involves the sequence of conversational moves and exchanges.

The integration of the three types of utterance building is, in fact, the process of conversation building. In verbal interactions, speakers have to pay attention to their communicative strategies in order to, on the one hand, make their utterances correctly interpreted, on the other hand, make the conversation flow smoothly. Various aspects will play their role in the process of conversation building. The paper will study from the following two angles: perspective taking and turn taking.

B. *Perspective Taking*

Perspective is originally a spatio-visual concept meaning the art of representing objects as they appear to an observer seen from a particular vantage point (Wang Shaohua, 2004: 2-3). This term is often used in language production and interpretation, the process of which involves the subjectivity of language users, as the process of observation does. Perspective is an object of negotiation in the process of conversation building because speakers and listeners, who repeatedly switch roles, must establish a mutual understanding of what the discourse is about and what the utterer’s standpoint is.

Perspective taking is not done once and for ever. On the contrary, utterers constantly take one perspective at this moment and shift into another perspective at another moment. They make appropriate adaptations when their designed utterances fail to work for their purposes. Wang Shaohua lists three factors influencing conversationalists’ perspective taking: their knowledge of differences in perspective, their ability to see things from the partners’ point of view, and their motivation (2004: 82). Among the three factors, motivation is the most important one. Speakers may not be willing to shift their perspectives even if they know their partners’ perspectives and are able to adapt to them, depending on their goals. In literary works, the goals in communication do not only include those of the characters but also those of the authors.

“Bon soir, Monsieur Duval,” Dan said, “Excuses-nous de troubler votre sommeil, mais nous venons de la presse et nous savons que vous avez une histoire intéressante à nous raconter.”

The stowaway shook his head slowly.

“It won’t do no good talking French,” Stubby Gates interjected. “Henri don’t understand it. Seems like ‘e got’ is languages mixed up when ‘e was a nipper. Best try ‘im in English, but take it slow.”

“All right.” Turning back to the stowaway, Dan said carefully, “I am from the Vancouver Post. A newspaper. We would like to know about you. Do you understand?”

There was a pause. Dan tried again. “I want to talk with you. Then I will write about you.”

“Why you write?” The words-the first Duval had spoken- held a mixture of surprise and suspicion.

The above conversation is selected from Arthur Hailey’s fiction *In High Places*. The adaptation of the journalist’s perspective is shown through his choice of code and syntactic structure. At first the Australian reporter, Dan, speaks French to the stowaway whose name is Duval because the stowaway is allegedly supposed to be a Frenchman. The knowledge of the stowaway’s alleged nationality, the ability to speak French and the motivation to be polite and friendly make Dan choose French and take the stowaway’s position into consideration in the interaction. But it proves that the

preliminary perspective fails to get the response from the stowaway, so Dan switches into English after being suggested by the sailor, Stubby Gates. The introduction to himself, the first person plural form “we” and the polite request “We would like to...” suggest that Dan shifts his perspective from the stowaway’s side into the Vancouver Post’s side. When Dan again fails to achieve his goal, he adopts the informal tone and simple sentences to speak to the stowaway. His perspective switches to the stowaway once again and it successfully elicits a response from Duval. The changes of his perspective are determined by his intention to interview Duval and obtain the desired information. The process of dynamically taking and shifting perspectives finally realizes the communicative ends of the journalist.

C. Turn Taking

The basic unit of the conversation is the turn which is taken alternatively by speaker and hearer in the process of conversation (Jacob L. Mey, 1993: 139). In normal conversation, speakers do not speak at the same time: they wait for their turn. That is to say, conversationalists take turns to participate in the interaction. The research of turn-taking is the central issue in conversation analysis. A better understanding of conversational turn-taking can not only help us further our knowledge of conversation analysis, but also help us to apply theories concerning it to practice so as to get a better communication result (Zhang Tingguo, 2003: 23). Turn-taking analysis is one of the methods adopted in literary work to not only reveal power relations and characters’ personalities, but also help to further push the development of the plots (Li Huadong and Yu Dongming, 2001: 30).

“Now,” said Monks, when they had all three seated themselves, “the sooner we come to our business, the better for all. The woman know what it is, does she?”

The question was addressed to Bumble; but his wife anticipated the reply, by intimating that she was perfectly acquainted with it.

“He is right in saying that you were with this hag the night she died; and that she told you something—”

“About the mother of the boy you named,” replied the matron interrupting him. “Yes.”

“The first question is, of what nature was her communication?” said Monks.

“That’s the second,” observed the woman with much deliberation. “The first is, what may the communication be worth?”

“Who the devil can tell that, without knowing of what kind it is?” asked Monks

“Nobody better than you, I am persuaded,” answered Mrs. Bumble.....

“Humph!” said Monks significantly, and with a look of eager inquiry; “there may be money’s worth to get, eh?”

“Perhaps there may,” was the composed reply.

“Something that was taken from her,” said Monks. “Something that she wore. Something that—”

“You had better bid,” interrupted Bumble, “I have heard enough, already, to assure me that you are the man I ought to talk to.”

Three participants are involved in the conversation from *Oliver Twist*: Monks, Mr. Bumble and Mrs. Bumble. Only Monks and Mrs. Bumble get the turns to speak; while Mr. Bumble is allocated no turn. The first question raised by Monks shows that the current speaker, Monks, has selected Mr. Bumble as the next speaker; however, the turn is taken by Mrs. Bumble who replaces Mr. Bumble to talk about the vicious deal with Monks. The behavior of Mrs. Bumble shows that she is in the controlling position before her husband. In the process of the conversation, Mrs. Bumble interrupts Monks before he finishes his turn. The violation of the turn-taking rules is caused by Mrs. Bumble’s impatience. The money-driven woman intends to wrap up the deal and get the money as soon as possible. These interruptions also put Mrs. Bumble in an advantageous point: she is the person who controls the flow of the conversation and who gets the upper hand in the deal.

V. CONCLUSION

Applying pragmatic theories to the research of fictional conversations provides a new perspective to approach literary works. The pragmatic explanation of the styles of fictional conversations will result in a more systematic, more explicit and more convincing interpretations to the works as well as to writers. Through pragmatic analysis of literary conversations, the psychological states, social world and physical contexts of writers and fictional figures can be revealed. It also helps literary critics to approach fictions more profoundly.

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