

On the Depiction of Characters of “Drinking in the Passage” with Adaptation Theory

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Abstract—“Drinking in the Passage” is a text for sophomore of English – majors. In teaching this text, students should be taught not only the new words and language points, but also how to appreciate the text from a linguistic angle. Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory which is praised highly in the field of pragmatics. This paper discusses the psychological process of characters in “Drinking in the Passage” including the application of this theory, which contains adaptation of context and of structure; features of adaptation, which refers to the dynamics and consciousness of adaptation. All this indicates that the language that adapts to the context is appropriate and adequate, and it can reflect the inner world of characters.

Index Terms—adaptation theory, context, dynamics, consciousness

I. INTRODUCTION

Everybody is a social animal who needs to deal with others. The most common form to do this is language, so how to speak out suitable language is quite necessary. Verschueren (2000) points out that language has such features as variability, negotiability and adaptability: “Adaptability is the property of language which enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs.” (Verschueren, p.61). Adaptation Theory offers us a new viewpoint in language study. In communication, the speaker makes his language choice based on these features, and then speaks out adequately while the listener has to understand the speaker’s utterance on the basis of the adaptation so as to make their talk effective. Normally, Adaptation Theory is often used in translation, such as, Ge Lingling (2001/2002), Wang Jianguo (2005), there are also some research on pragmatics as Ran Yongping, Yang Wei (2011), He Ziran, Jiang Xiaohong (2010), but the application of Adaptation Theory in literature appreciation is seldom seen.

“A Drink in the Passage” is a short story by a South Africa writer named Alan Paton. The story appears in “Contemporary College English” (Intensive Reading Book 4) which describes what has happened after a black young man wins a prize in 19th century in South Africa under White Racism. Through the conversation between a white young man Van Rensburg and a black young man Simelane and, we can see that the Adaptation Theory plays an important role in social conversation and it aids us to know more about the characters and their inner world. In analyzing the text, teachers have to make students learn not only the background and language points in the text, but also try to appreciate the text from a linguistic point of view. Normally, both students and teachers have such concept that to learn a text in Intensive Reading is to keep the new words by heart, and make clear language points, being able to sum up the main idea of the text and do the exercises etc. seldom students can be taught how to enjoy the description of psychology of the characters and what psychological process the characters have experienced and why they have such a change. This indicates that the teaching of this course is still something fundamental, not on a higher level.

Students just are aware the basic elements of this course, without any idea how to improve their abilities in learning such texts. In my point of view, they should be made clear that as English majors, they ought to learn more advanced knowledge about a text, otherwise how they can tell themselves apart from non-English-majors, that is, they should be able to combine some linguistic theories with practice, to understand and appreciate the text in a linguistic view, to know better about the characters and their speech and behavior. Next, the application of linguistic theory --- Adaptation Theory in the text “Drinking in the Passage” will be talked about.

II. APPLICATION OF ADAPTATION THEORY IN THE STORY

In the analysis of the text, we can apply Adaptation Theory to it to show the psychological process of the characters. The white man in the text appears very active and eager to talk to the black while the black man always seems passive and reluctant, certainly this is inseparable from the background of the text. At that time, South Africa was under the rule of the White, there were serious racial discrimination and racial segregation, the Black were of no social status, they were the oppressed and the exploited. They had to endure the inequality and unfairness between the white and the black. They could not get what they deserved. As can be seen from the story, the black man named Simelane could not even admit he was the prizewinner of the contest. All the time, he was reluctant to answer the questions and very cautious when he was invited to have a drink by the white. What’s in their mind? What determines their conduct? It is the adaptation to the context in order to meet the communicative needs and satisfaction of both sides that counts. From the

viewpoint of this linguistic theory, all this can be explained.

A. *Adaptation of Context*

The application of Adaptation Theory lies in actual language use. Only in this case can we know that whether the language adapts to the context and suitable and adequate. Let us take “A Drink in the Passage” for example. A black young man’s sculpture “African Mother and Child” won a prize, which attracted the attention of a white young man named Van Rensburg. He invited the black to his home to have a drink without knowing the black was the prizewinner. The black got compliment from the white but the white man didn’t invite him to have a drink in his flat, but drink in the passage.

In the text, when the black man Simelane got the first prize, he should have gone to get this award personally, but he did not. He said to others “I wasn’t feeling up to it. My parents and my wife’s parents, and our priests, decided that I wasn’t feeling up to it. And finally I decided so too. Of course Majosi and Sola and the others wanted me to go and get the prize personally, but I said, ‘boys, I’m a sculptor, not a demonstrator.’” This confession indicates that Simelane did not go to get his award is to adapt to the environment. In the social and political atmosphere in South Africa at that time, if he goes personally, he might encounter some unexpected accident. Because there has long been such a tradition that the black are just inferior, they can not get involved in such fine arts as sculpture, and even if they do, it should not be them to get the first prize. Now this happens out of control, the white will not let it go smoothly, most probably they will do something to harm the prizewinner. So Simelane decides that he will not go to get the honour. What he says just demonstrates his thought. He does not want to irritate the white by going to the spot to get his award. So this is so miserable and unfair to the black, but what can they do except this? He does not want to risk his life because of this.

Another example in the story is when Van Rensburg asks Simelane if he knows the prize winner, the black denies. Actually he himself is the prizewinner. Then why he does not admit it? Anyhow this is something honorable. From the Adaptation Theory, we can see that at that time in South Africa, there was serious racial discrimination and racial segregation, in which the black were looked down upon by the white, they were inferior to the white. The black had to adapt to the situation to hide himself in case this may get him into trouble. He did not even go to the place to get the award for the same reason.

On their way to the white man’s home, there is a dialogue between the two, in which it is always the white who asks questions but the black “unwillingly” replies briefly. “Then he (Van Rensburg) said to me: ‘Are you educated?’, I said unwillingly, ‘Yes’. He asked: ‘Far?’ and again unwillingly: ‘Far’. He took a big leap: ‘Degree?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Literature?’ ‘Yes’. From the conversation we can see that Simelane is so cautious and reluctant to answer the questions by the white, he simply replies with one word. Take the context into consideration, the black’s action can be comprehended. As the black was inferior, he has to answer the questions by the white in case his silence may offend Van Rensburg, but he was unwilling to do so, from this the depression and reluctance of the black can be felt.

Another example occurs below on their way to the white man’s home. This indicates his awkward condition and the oppressed state. In his inner heart he does not want to deal with the white man but in that circumstances, he has to. So he is quite passive in the communication. However, to adapt to the context, he has to respond to the white man’s questions. Students should be taught to analyze the text like this. Up to this level, they ought to have a clear idea that to read a story between the lines, not just the literal meaning is vital, its implied meaning is more important, and also students should be taught to understand why the characters are very careful in their choice of words.

There is one more example to illustrate this. Owing to the long-term racial segregation, there is little mutual understanding between them. When Van Rensburg introduced the black to other whites, he simply says “He’s BA”. Why does he introduce Simelane that way? Because in that context, among the other white people, his BA degree can signify that he is a well-educated black, so other white men will not feel annoyed or disgraced to speak to him. Otherwise if he is an illiterate black, maybe he will ask for trouble. To adapt to the context, Van Rensburg chooses to introduce the black man this way. All this indicates that the characters in the text are aware the adaptation of context, utterances should change according to the change of the context and the speaker has to make the right choice in language in differing cases.

B. *Adaptation of Structure*

The adaptation of structure means to fit the context, the speaker makes suitable choice in language code, tone, style and intonation etc. in order to make communications go smoothly and effectively. Language choice has to be made in accordance with specific cultural background and language style, but the communicative effect may not be fit. In fact, if we are so critical about language use, the conversation can be interrupted often, hence we have to choose appropriate way to express ourselves. Let’s get some examples to illustrate. When the white man meets a black man by chance at the site of the sculpture exhibition, Van Rensburg asks Simelane “What do you think of that, mate?” At that time, the black were not normally called “mate” because of racial discrimination, they were often despised and called mean names. The white man does this just indicates that he does want to speak to the black, he chooses the relatively equal word “mate”. When the white man invited the black to have a drink, he said “Mate, would you like a drink?” not only he uses the word “mate”, he also takes a very polite form to say “would you...?” He made such choice in the structure to get the satisfaction of the black who may love to accept his invitation. He implies that he truly wants Simelane to accept the invitation. This change in style expresses the speaker’s will to make successful communication. We can

imagine, while speaking, the white man must do this in a friendly intonation. It can not be demanding, as in his heart, he wants to exchange opinions with the black about the sculpture, so Such a friendly request is hard to refuse. So Simelane goes with him to his flat to have a drink. Teachers should be required to teach students enjoy such changes in style and understand the charm of the language and the psychological state of the characters. It is not that only the black who have to be polite in their dealing with the white; for the goal of communication, the white man can also have to change their style and intonation according to the context.

Another example is that when Simelane was offered a plate of biscuits by a middle-aged white lady, he was about to show his thanks. But how to express his gratitude ? He experienced such a process "... but not for all the money in the world could I have said to her *dankie, my nooi* (Thank you, miss) or that disgusting *dankie*, misses, nor did I want to speak to her in English because her language was Afrikaans, so I took the risk of it and used the word *mevrouw(madam)*, ...I said, in high Afrikaans, with a smile and a bow too, "*Ek is a dankbaar, Mevrouw.*(Thank you very much, madam)". Why did he make such efforts to choose the right expression to express his thanks? Because he wants to make his utterance polite and match his identity, he is a BA, and more importantly his words suits the context. The listener is a middle-aged lady, it will sound ridiculous to greet her as "miss", she speaks Afrikaan, so instead of speaking English, he uses the very formal Afrikaans to show his gratitude, which pitches in with the situation. The style of the language changes in accordance with the context so as to show respect to the listener and appropriately maintain the speaker's status. As can be seen, in the choice of words, and the changing psychological process, the depiction of the character are well achieved, a refined and cultivated black figure stands up in front of the readers.

III. FEATURES OF ADAPTATION

In this part, features of adaptation will be talked about. Adaptation has it own features, including dynamics and consciousness. For dynamics, it means everything is changing, adaptation has to follow suit as well. Why? Because the context changes, so does adaptation. As the conversation goes on, both sides are changing their style and manners constantly, they have to make necessary adaptation to meet the needs of it and also they have to think about how to go on with the conversation successfully. As for consciousness of both sides, it refers to the fact that how much awareness both sides have to adapt to the context. If they have a low degree of consciousness of adaptation, they do not know how to make right choice of words and change their style or intonation or tone etc. to make the other side satisfied, and vice versa.

A. Dynamics of Adaptation

Verschueren (2000) points out that in communication, in order to make the conversation successful, one has to make careful choice of words to suit the context. But the adaptation is not stable, it changes all the time, so the language has to follow suit. The listener has to be taken into consideration in the course of adaptation. As the conversation goes on among people, all the spheres concerning the participants have to be involved in terms of the social relationships, such as the background, social status, work, closeness to the listener etc. the speaker's psychological state also changes, so does the adaptation.

When Simelane was invited to have a drink in the white man's flat, he was arranged to drink in the passage instead of the room. This was beyond his expectation and it was unbearable. He describes his emotions then "Now I certainly had not expected that I would have my drink in the passage. ...Anger could have saved me from the whole embarrassing situation, but you know I can't easily be angry. Even if I could have been, I might have found it hard to be angry with this particular man. But I wanted to get away from there, and I couldn't." In that case, he was very cross in his heart, he wants to defend himself for his indignation, but he can't. Why is that? He is black. And the black can not offend the white in any circumstances at that time in South Africa, even if he is a well-educated black. So he hides his anger inside and shows his courtesy outside. This is a case in point to support the dynamics of adaptation.

In the passage, when Van Rensburg goes to fetch brandy, a white woman is talking to Simelane, "She looked back at the room, and then she dropped her voice a little, and said to me, 'Can't you see, it's somehow because it's a black woman and a black child?' Normally at that place at that time, a white does not have to speak in a low voice, they are the ruling class, but she does so, just because she is talking to a black man and she is talking of a sculpture of a black mother and her child, she has to drop her voice a little. She's doing this to fit the context, otherwise it may get her into trouble. This also indicates that language is restricted by context. When in use, the speaker has to revise his words constantly and convert the style of his speech to attain the goal of successful communication.

When he meets Simelane in front of the sculpture, Van Rensburg says "I come and look at it nearly every night. It's beautiful. Look at that mother's head. She's loving that child, but she's somehow watching, too ... mate, would you like a drink?" When they are talking about the sculpture, he suddenly changes the topic and this seems strange due to racial segregation. The white may never invite a black to do something together. This illustrates the dynamic of adaptation: Simelane is a black, and the sculpture is done by a black, so Van Rensburg wants to share his feelings with Simelane about the sculpture, as we can see that he truly shows his sympathy for the black and appreciation of the sculpture. Therefore, he switches the topic from sculpture to a drink. In a word, we can tell students that in conversation people can always change the subject from time to time just indicates the dynamics of adaptation works.

B. Consciousness Degree of Adaptation

Verschueren (2000) admits that in speech there always exists subject consciousness. "Consciousness always plays a role" (Verschueren, p.173). The development of human cognition goes from primitive to higher level gradually. From the viewpoint of human cognition, nothing is absolute, everything is changing. Language is a complicated system and human society is a more complex one, both sides of a conversation are people with ideas and wills and emotions. The production of a meaning is the mutual process of utterance and context. To make a choice of words is to adapt to the context. Choice is the means, and adaptation is the goal.

Take the dialogue in the text for example. When he was invited to have a drink by Van Rensburg, Simelane makes such description: "By this time he had started off, and I was following, but not willingly. We didn't exactly walk abreast, but he didn't exactly walk in front of me. He didn't look constrained. He wasn't looking round to see if anyone might be watching." As can be seen, the black was not willing to accept the arrangement of the white man. Because of the long-term racial discrimination and racial segregation in South Africa, the indifference and unfriendliness makes the black on guard against the white, the black are always in the inferior position, which let them speak or do things cautiously, and they are esp. worried when they deal with the white. On the contrary, the white are so different from them as they are the ruling class, and they can do whatever they like. Hence, they do things more freely than the black, which is understandable.

As a matter of fact, take the novel as a whole, we can feel that the white are always the dominant. As it can be imagined that usually in South Africa at that time, the white enjoy the privilege, they treat the black with superiority. The white man, Van Rensburg treats Simelane kindly, mostly it is that he has the strong will to share his ideas with Simelane, which is to adapt to the environment. However, the black is the party that is often despised, so Simelane has a strong sense to protect himself. Most of the time, he keeps silent or gives a brief answer when asked. This inequality in conversation demonstrate that Simelane is very clear about his case, so he even doesn't tell Van Rensburg his true name. He knows how to adjust to the situation he is in. This can account for his caution and passivity. At the end of the story, when the white man drove the black to the railway station, Van Rensburg is frustrated "He sat slumped in his seat, like a man with a burden of incomprehensible and insoluble grief." Even if he is not satisfied with the black man, but he is not mad at the black man. He is aware that it is not Simelane's fault. It is the system that makes them separated. When he was on the train back to his home, Simelane reflects that "... he was like a man trying to run a race in iron shoes, and not understanding why he cannot move." From the analysis, the characters in the novel are aware of the adaptation, they know in certain circumstance, how to adjust their own language, gesture and tone etc. to fit the context. Students can learn about the positive white man and the passive oppressed black man and their characters.

To appreciate the novel from the viewpoint of Adaptation Theory is a new angle differing from others and it also helps students to get an idea of some linguistic theories. Actually these theories are practical and easy. Normally, students think linguistic theories are hard to understand and useless, they always take a repellent attitude towards it.

From the novel, we can teach students that the accurate choice of words and the right manner and help students to understand the characters better. Because the context is changing, so is the language. Both sides of a conversation should learn to adjust the strategies of speaking in order to make oneself choose the correct form of language to adapt to the context to be understood better. In this way can both sides have a smooth and enjoyable conversation.

Note: all the examples are taken from the textbook "Contemporary College English (Book 4)"

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