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The semiotic dimension of contemporary pragmatics

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Abstract. Contemporary Pragmatics has the semiotic features from the respects of disciplinary naming, the means of development, and theoretical source to research object and method. It is not only an independent linguistics and language science, but also an interdisciplinary field and paradigm. This paper is to explore the semiotic features and dimensions of Pragmatics for tracing back the origin and the theoretical resources from semiotic perspective, and to define its research scope and clarify the connotation of its conception. As Semiotics has a triad dimension of semiosis, one of which is the “pragmatic dimension”. Therefore, contemporary pragmatics includes at least three semiotic dimensions: scientific semiotics, linguistic semiotics and social semiotics. The semiotic analysis of Pragmatics could be conducive to clarify and fix the semiotic and philosophical origin, definition, disciplinary connotation and meaning of Pragmatics, which is also theoretically helpful for clarifying the concepts for the study of philosophical pragmatism, pragmatism, semiotics, semantics and syntax.

Keywords. Semiotic, Pragmatics, Pragmaticism

The Problems in the Process of Development of Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a “rapidly developing field”, “branch discipline” and “independent discipline” in Contemporary Linguistics (Huang 2007:1-3); It is the study on “science of language use” (Haberland & Mey 1977:1) and the “new perspective” of Linguistics (ibid.: 5), as well as the new “paradigm” of Linguistics (Mey 2001:4). It is not only a linguistic perspective of philosophy, sociology and anthropology, but also a “cognitive, social and cultural perspective” to study the behavior of language use (Verschueren 1999:7). Pragmatics not only has its own theories and methodologies, but also affects the theories and methods of many other disciplines; It has research objects and is studied as objects simultaneously. Contemporary pragmatic theories emerge endlessly and has got great achievements, but some problems at the disciplinary aspect have not been clarified so far, i.e., the definition and boundary of Pragmatics are still uncertain. Levinson (1983) pointed out that pragmatics is an inevitable part of semantic theory; If pragmatics takes precedence over semantics logically, then a general linguistic theory must take pragmatics as its component or a dimension so as to be called a complete integration theory, “just as, traditionally, syntax is taken to be the study of the combinatorial properties of words and their parts, and semantics to be the study of meaning, so pragmatics is the study of language usage, but it will hardly suffice to indicate what the practitioners of pragmatics actually do” (ibid.:6-7). It only explains what pragmatics is concerned with, which is a principle

rather than a definition; It is impossible to distinguish pragmatics from Psycholinguistics and Sociolinguistics by referring to nonverbal reasons to explain the problem of language structure. The critical issue of the definition of pragmatics is that this term covers the aspects of the contextual dependence of language structure and the principles of language use and understanding, which have little relationship with language structure and are difficult to give consideration to both. Ariel (2012:23) pointed out that there is no clear definition of pragmatics that is recognized by most pragmaticists.

Pragmatics is generally recognized as being derived from “pragmatics” put forward by American pragmatist philosopher and semiotician Morris (1938:6), which is a branch of semiotics for studying the “pragmatical dimension of semiosis”. The term “Pragmatics” has obviously been coined with reference to the term “Pragmatism” (Morris 1938:29), which is a semiotic terminology. Morris’s Semiotics includes the three dimensions of Semantics, Syntax and Pragmatics. In addition to Semantics, Syntax and Pragmatics, contemporary Linguistics also has many other branches such as phonology and morphology. Semiotics is a “general theory of signs” (ibid.: 5), and a science of sciences as well as an organon of sciences (ibid.: 56). Under the complex relationship between semiotics and linguistics, little consensus could be agreed between pragmaticists and semioticians (Parret 1983:1). Even many divergencies are existed within Pragmatics: some pragmaticists regard Morris as the “father of pragmatics” (Verschueren 1999:6), others think he is just a linguist and only provides a name for Pragmatics (Chapman 2011:46). Many pragmatic works are based on Morris, but most of them only use his classical definition (Mey 2001:4). Some don’t refer to Morris at all, but focus on Saussure. Some completely hold a negative view towards semiotics and believe that modern semiotics is both successful and failed as it is the prosperity of semiotics teaching and research on one hand, it is its theoretical defects that are unable to explain the dilemma of language communication on the other (Sperber & Wilson 1986:7-8). In the process of developing from “pragmatism” to “pragmatics”, there are the linguistic turn of philosophy, the foundation of ordinary language philosophy and generative semantics, the research paradigm turn of linguistics and the pragmatic turn of many other disciplines. It is rarely to find the complexity of the development of contemporary pragmatics, the number of theories and methods, the wide scope of disciplines and the great disputes among schools in other disciplines except contemporary semiotics.

Therefore, the researcher attempts to analyze Pragmatics from the perspective of complex relationship between Pragmatics and Semiotics so as to explore the semiotic features and dimension of Pragmatics, which may be conducive to the research of fixing boundary of pragmatics and giving a more academic and widely-recognized definition of pragmatics in a parental way.

Semiotic Analysis of Pragmatics

Pragmatics plays and develops the role of “interpretant” in Peirce’s Semiotics, and more obviously, it is one of the three branches of semiosis proposed by Morris. It studies the relationship between signs and their users. The meaning of sign expression is the results of various interpretations from different users. The philosophical basis of pragmatics is Peirce’s pragmatism, or pragmaticism, which studies the relationship between meaning and context, i.e., the illocutionary meaning being excluded in the scope of Semantics. The main methodology of Pragmatics is logical reasoning. In order to trace back the philosophical and semiotic thought of pragmatics, it seems that we have to first clarify what pragmatics is and the scope of its research.

At present, two types of definitions of Pragmatics and its research scope are advocated: (1) the narrow and specific definition from British and American Analytical Philosophy School (Levinson, 1983; Leech, 1983; Peccei, 2000), and (2) the broad definition from European and American Continental School (Verschueren, 1999; Mey, 2001). The former focuses on the researches of deixis, presupposition, conversational implicature, speech act and conversational structure. The latter covers a wide range, involving “studying language phenomena and behaviors from the perspective of cognition, society and culture” (Verschueren, 1999), as well as “discourse analysis, meta pragmatics and social pragmatics” (Mey, 2001). Although British and American Analytical Philosophy School acknowledges the semiotic origin of Pragmatics from Charles Morris (1901-1979) who is obviously inspired by the philosophy of Pragmatism from Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), they haven’t yet done any further analysis and research grounded on Morris’s semiotics which is derived from Peirce’s Semiotic Theory. Actually, some scholars, like Winfried Nöth (1990), Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen (2004), have directly connected Pragmatics with Pragmatism proposed and advocated by Peirce.

Peirce’s Pragmatism is also called pragmaticism which he adopted for being distinguished from other philosophical thoughts of Pragmatism and emphasizing the effect. Peirce’s philosophy of Pragmaticism and semiotics are directly related to Pragmatics as follows:

(1) The starting point of Peirce’s theory is similar to subjective empiricism. He believes that “the nature of objects is effect”, which is prominently reflected in his trichotomic sign models, i.e., sign-object-interpretant (short for S-O-I). In the process of human cognition, a sign does not fully represent the meaning of object, and the meaning must be interpreted by man, i.e., the meaning of the object is judged and evaluated by human subjective experience. This viewpoint has been exercised in Pragmatics. In the process of information communication, meaning is the relationship between the sign and the users (the addresser and the addressee), in other words, what the addresser expresses is interpreted by the addressee (interpretant), which is the results of the logical reasoning of the addresser’s utterances in a given context. This may be the most fundamental theoretical basis of Pragmatics.

(2) In Peirce’s view, the human cognitive activities are equivalent with the instinctive action of living beings to adapt themselves to environment. Grounded on Peirce’s view, Morris created the theory of biological behaviorism, which is related to Speech Act theories proposed and developed by John Austin (1911-1960) and John Searl (1932-), because they advocate “doing things with words” and claim that the application of language is doing things, speech is act as such.

(3) Peirce put forward the meaning theory of Pragmatism: the meaning of a concept is not determined by the meaning it reflects, but by all the effects of the action it causes. This view is related to Speech Act Theories proposed by Austin and Searl, because they proposed the triad of locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. Perlocutionary act is the effect caused by speech.

(4) Peirce’s logic is another name of semiotics, and sign activity is the application of logic. Peirce divided the signs into the firstness, the secondness and the thirdness, which is actually the process of sign generation. A sign denotes to its object, but it does not fully represent the meaning of the object.

This referential relationship has to be interpreted so as to generate the meaning of a sign, i.e., the interpretant. Interpretant again could be interpreted infinitely, which is Peirce’s “semiosis ad infinitum”. Interpretation is logical reasoning. (Guo, 2004) Therefore, Peirce’s semiotics is actually the methodology of Pragmatics. Conversational implicature is the Pragmatic reasoning of the words that violate the Cooperative Principle according to the

context, so as to find out the illocutionary meaning. Pragmatics studies the relationship between meaning and context. Meaning is the result of the addressee's logical reasoning on the words of addresser according to the context.

The Semiotic Dimension of Pragmatics

Semiotic, or sign theory, has come to serve for many as an all-inclusive term; yet the contemporary use of the term "semiotic" derives from the highly influential theory articulated by Charles Morris, who in turn acquired it from C. S. Peirce, the founder of modern semiotic. Morris adopts from Peirce the name semiosis for the general theory of signs. Being influenced by Charles Sanders Peirce, he first used the term 'pragmatics' as a branch of semiotics in 1930s (Morris, 1938). Later this term was taken in linguistics for granted as a name of one of its core branches dealing with usage of language. Morris, in fact, isolates semiotics into three different branches— syntax, semantics and pragmatics. According to his interpretation, pragmatics incorporates the study of 'the relation of signs to interpreters' (Morris 1938:6). As Morris's semiotics has three dimensions of semiosis, the pragmatic dimension is only one of them, therefore, contemporary pragmatics has at least three semiotic dimensions as follows:

(1) Pragmatics as science and organon of sciences. Morris (1938: 2) pointed out that "Semiotics has a double relation to the sciences: it is both a science among the sciences and an instrument of the sciences. The significance of semiotic as a science lies in the fact that it is a step in the unification of science, since it supplies the foundations for any special science of signs". Every science must use signs and the means of signs to express its research results. Therefore, semiotics must provide relevant signs and principles needed for research. Semiotics must use meta-signs of indices. Contemporary pragmatics is not only a linguistic science, but also a science that intersects and interacts with other scientific fields. It integrates various studies from the perspective of pragmatics in the field of linguistics and language science, and provides theories, perspectives and methods for other disciplines. Therefore, pragmatics, as the organon of sciences and the object being studied, has the attributes of semiotics.

(2) Pragmatics as meta-semiotics and meta-linguistics. Morris also pointed out that the science which takes semiotics as an instrument to study science is meta-science. He regards all the terms in the different disciplines involving "pragmatics" as the semiotical ones (Morris 1938:8), "such terms as 'interpreter' 'interpretant' 'convention' (when applied to signs), 'taking-account-of' (when a function of signs), 'verification', and 'understands' are terms of Pragmatics, while many strictly semiotic terms such as 'sign' 'language' 'truth' and 'knowledge' have important pragmatical components" (ibid.:33).

Morris distinguished pure semiotics from descriptive Semiotics (Morris 1938: 9), which is also the distinction between meta-semiotics and semiotics. The proposal of "Metapragmatics" in the field of linguistic anthropology by Silverstein (1976) and the importance of "meta pragmatic thinking" on Pragmatics and its research objectives and methods (Mey 2001:178) reveal an important semiotic dimension of pragmatics. Morris pointed out that the language used to discuss scientific language is metalanguage (Morris 1938:9-22). He later emphasized that semiotics could "provide meta language for Linguistics", which could generate a science of linguistics grounded on the Theory of Semiotics (Morris 1946: 221). Leech (1983) put forward the terms of "meta implicature" "metaproposition" and "meta maxim" on the foundation of pragmatic terms as "meaning" "proposition" and "maxim". He also proposed to explore the meta-theory by virtue of the quality of "metagrammar" in the process of description, the problem of "metalanguage" of politeness, and the "metalinguistic strategy" used by the

speaker. Thereby, the theory of metalanguage and metatheory is another semiotic dimension of contemporary pragmatics.

(3) Pragmatics as social semiotics. Social semiotics is an important branch of contemporary semiotics, which is developed from Saussure's Theory of Semiotics. It studies the social dimension of human beings in the process of designing and interpreting the meaning of signs. Social Pragmatics proposed by Leech (1983) is actually the definition of another semiotic dimension of pragmatics under the influence of Halliday (1978)'s "language is social sign". Halliday has a further analysis of the "situational context" of language communication, and has noticed the direct "pragmatic relationship" between discourse and context. It is believed that pragmatic language is language representing action, which has the social functions (ibid.: 29-32). Thibault (1997: 153) pointed out that the pragmatics of a single discourse is systematically related to the semiotic form, and the semantics of language form cannot be separated from the contextual pragmatic meaning of discourse. From potential meaning to meaning embodiment, systemic choice is meaning from the respect of social semiotics. Therefore, this semantics is a linguistic theory including pragmatics. As the social meaning dependent on context is realized through selection in the system, Thibault believes that "the semantics of specific discourse symbols is pragmatics" (ibid.:153). Semantics from the perspective of social semiotics, especially discourse and discourse semantics, is an important part of contemporary pragmatics. Therefore, social semiotics is also an important semiotic dimension of contemporary pragmatics.

Conclusion

Pragmatics is closely related to the qualities of Semiotics in many aspects. Eco defines that "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign" (Eco 1976: 9) and Semiotics also focuses on anything meaningful in the fields of Linguistics and Science of Language. Morris's semiotics is a summary of three philosophical schools: pragmatism, empiricism and logical positivism. In 1934, he put forward three kinds of relations of signs (with people, with objects, with other signs). It was only in 1938 that pragmatics, semantics and syntax were put forward in the framework of sign theory. Saussure's semiotics is the direct theoretical basis of modern linguistics, but it did not have a wide influence in the English world until 1959. Although Saussure did not put forward pragmatics, his semiotics has the nature of pragmatic semiotics, which is a method of discourse research that has been developed traditionally by Barthes' semiotics since the late 1960s (Sturrock 2003: 41). The pragmatic scope of classical pragmatics is much narrower than that of Morris Semiotics (Levinson 1983:2). Therefore, Pragmatics is developed and prosperous in the connection with Semiotics, as one of the fastest growing fields in "contemporary linguistics and philosophy of language" (Huang 2007:1). The kernel of its fastest development lies in the nature of semiotic dimension. In sum, the essence of pragmatics and semiotics is the study of "meaning", and the natural combination of semiotics and pragmatic philosophy can help us to analyze "pragmatics" from the perspective of semiotics, so as to clarify the historical and theoretical roots of the development of "pragmatics" as an independent discipline from the previous "wastebasket" to the contemporary prosperity, which may help us make a correct prediction of the future development of Pragmatics.

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