

On Cataphora in English Conversations From the Perspective of Relevance Theory

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Cataphora is an essential cohesive device though occurring rarely in natural conversations. Regarding Relevance Theory, an individual's cognitive system, only processes those assumptions relevant to his context in communication. Thus, speakers should be listener-friendly to achieve effective communication. Adopting Relevance Theory, this paper aims to explore its explanatory power to cataphora in English conversations. The findings suggest that Relevance Theory can provide a reasonable explanation for cataphora.

Keywords: cataphora, English conversations, Relevance Theory

Introduction

The existing research on cataphora mainly focuses on literary texts, while less attention is paid to spoken discourse. Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) explored the relationship between human communication and mental cognition, holding that people tend to acquire the maximal contextual effect with the least processing effort. This paper aims to analyze cataphora in English conversations in terms of Relevance Theory.

Literature Review

Cataphora is "The use of a word or a phrase which refers forward to another word or phrase which will be used later in the text or conversation" (Richards & Schmidt, 2013, p. 70). Compared with anaphora, "the productivity of cataphora is much lower" (Kesik, 1985). The major approaches adopted by scholars abroad on cataphora are classified into three types, namely syntactic, functional, and cognitive. The syntactic approach is mainly done within TG and GB framework. Langacker (1969), for instance, put forward precede-and-command conditions in his analysis of prominalization. From a functional perspective, Macleod (1984) claimed that cataphora permits a separation of the nominal functions of existential assertion and denomination and that specific cases of cataphora may be instances of a very general feature—the avoidance of pronominal forms in topical or peak sentences or clauses. Ariel (1990) and van Hoek (1997) probed into cataphora from a cognitive perspective. Guided by her Accessibility Theory, Ariel (1990) found that distance and unity are the determining factors for the use of cataphora. Based on a corpus of 500 examples of cataphora drawn from texts, van Hoek (1997) pointed out that the number of nouns in salience is significantly higher than that of pronouns with the same reference.

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Compared with literature on cataphora in literary texts, cataphora in spoken discourse is not extensively investigated. Bruti (2004) analyzed the pragmatic functions of the demonstrative “this” and the shell nouns “thing” and “fact” in spoken English. Trnavac and Taboada (2016) explored the syntactic features and background functions of the third-person pronoun cataphora in spoken English. This present research will study the explanatory power of Relevance Theory to cataphora in English conversations.

Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory, proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986), defines communication as “a property of utterances and other inputs to cognitive processes” (p. 112) and aims to explore the nature of human communication. According to Relevance Theory, human cognition and communication are relevance-oriented, meaning that “Humans typically pay attention to the most relevant phenomena available, construct the most relevant representations of these phenomena, and process these representations in a context that maximizes their relevance” (Matsui, 2000, p. 25).

Sperber and Wilson (1986) suggested that in communication an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some contextual effects in that context. Contextual effects refer to the relations between the information conveyed by utterances and the context in which they are uttered. Each utterance captures the hearer’s attention and generates an expectation of relevance. Individuals only pay attention to the relevance that aligns with their expectations and process information that is closely related to their needs.

Optimal Relevance refers to the balance between the effort required to process an utterance and the amount of new information it conveys. Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed that utterances generate an expectation of achieving optimal relevance rather than maximal relevance. Optimal relevance suggests that the most relevant piece of information is the one that produces the greatest cognitive effects with the least processing effort. To achieve optimal relevance, speakers need to provide hearers with ostensive cues, which are clues that aid in understanding the intended meaning. These cues, combined with the hearer’s contextual and background knowledge, contribute to forming a mental representation of the speaker’s intended meaning. However, speakers may not always present the most relevant information in the least effort-demanding way. The communicative principle of relevance is an exceptionless generalization about what occurs when individuals engage in communication.

Explanatory Power of Relevance Theory to Cataphora

Successful communication relies on seeking optimal relevance, where an utterance achieves adequate contextual effects that are relevant enough to capture the hearer’s attention. The same utterance may have different interpretations in various contexts. Context and background assumptions play a crucial role in communication, as the true meaning of an utterance depends on the context in which it is interpreted. In the following, we will discuss the explanatory power of Relevance Theory to cataphora in English conversations with examples.

Example 1.

J: I’m just asking you this is else someone’s trainer.

N: Who’s.

J: My friends.

N: Why.

→J: Cos she bought some trainers for her little girl right you know Karen Adam's mum.

N: Yeah.

J: Yeah well she bought some trainers for her little girl and she doesn't want to show her she didn't know what size to get so she took of it to see what size it was and I said well Natalie's a thirteen that'll be a thirteen if it fits her.

In Example 1, “she” is the entity introduced into the conversation for the first time. Speaker J realizes that the hearer may not recognize what “she” refers to, so she promptly supplements the reference information. By using the discourse marker “you know”, hearer N can easily understand that “she” refers to “Karen Adam’s mum”. According to Relevance Theory, hearers only focus on and process words that are highly relevant in communication. In other words, they automatically search for the optimal relevant information based on the context and utterances. Drawing on their experiences and existing grammatical knowledge, individuals know that the discourse marker “you know” is employed as a reminder in the conversation.

It is evident that in communication, the context and background assumptions of the communicators play a crucial role. The true meaning of an utterance depends on the context in which it is interpreted. Without a specific context, it is impossible to draw any conclusions from the speaker’s stimuli. Sperber and Wilson (1986) proposed that an utterance can have various interpretations under different contexts. The hearers express their communicative intention through ostensive behaviors and make accurate inferences under the direction of ostension. For example,

Example 2.

X: Hello hello what you doing, what are yous doing, eh what you doing to mummy, eh what you doing to mummy, what are you doing to mummy.

Y: Urgh who's that in there.

X: Oh right we ready for a run eh. Is that your scarf is that your scarf.

→X: Where's it gone

→X: Rebecca/Where's puss puss puss.

→Y: Pussy cat pussy cat pussy cat.

X: Go on out out cat.

In Example 2, speaker X introduced the new entity “it” for the first time. If the speaker realizes that the hearer does not comprehend what the new entity refers to, the speaker will provide further clarification to the new entity by using proper names, noun phrases, and definite descriptors with additional information. This facilitates smooth communication. Therefore, in the conversation, Speaker X gave an ostensive stimulus by using “it” and subsequently used “puss” and “pussy cat” to explain what “it” refers to. This ensures that the information is relevant enough to capture the hearer’s attention, allowing the hearer to understand the speaker’s intended meaning. This exemplifies the explanatory power of Relevance Theory.

In communication, individuals constantly exchange information, which leads to changes and extensions of both parties’ cognitive environments. The interpretation of the previous utterance constitutes an immediately given context in which the next utterance may be processed. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986), the immediately given context is merely an initial context that can be further extended by adding assumptions or derived from previous deductive processes. That is, in the process of comprehension, the hearer may have to include in the context not only the immediately preceding utterance, but also the utterances that occurred earlier in the exchange to fully comprehend the conversation. For example,

Example 3.

- B: They went every
 B: in just about every weekend.
 →A: She said she.
 →A: She hated going.
 →B: (...) Hmm... who? His mom?
 →B: (...) It was Jack's mother?
 A: (...) Mhm.
 B: Hmm.
 B: But they had to go see her.

In Example 3, the context is that A said “She hated going”. Sperber and Wilson (1986) argued that in communication individuals automatically focus on what seems to them to be the most relevant information available. If none of the obvious literal meanings of an utterance is relevant, they will look for alternative meanings which might be relevant, or search for relevant information in the context of the utterance. Therefore, hearer B used various expressions, such as “His mom?” and “It was Jack’s mother?” to replace the cataphor “she”. According to Relevance Theory, contextual effects refer to the relationship between discourse information and context. The process of understanding discourse involves the interaction between old information in the cognitive environment and new information in the communication process. In the conversation, successful communication was achieved through the combination of the old information “she” and the new information “His mom?” and “It was Jack’s mother?”.

It can be concluded from the above analysis that Relevance Theory can provide a reasonable explanation for the cataphora in English conversation.

Conclusion

Language is the product of society, and its primary function is to facilitate communication among individuals. Following Relevance Theory, conversation understanding involves cognitive reasoning, psychological operations, and other factors that require the hearer to actively search for the relevance of discourse. This paper studied the explanatory power of Relevance Theory to cataphora in English conversations. The findings indicate that the cataphora in English conversations is in line with the optimal relevance principle. Relevance Theory can provide a reasonable explanation for the cataphora in English conversations, thereby aiding in the comprehension of such interactions.

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