

Research on Bilingual Acquisition Based on Ambiguity Sentences

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Abstract: Language ambiguity is one of the difficulties in learning a language. Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn because of its various ambiguities. This paper mainly explores the phenomenon of ambiguity in Chinese, and summarizes the research status of ambiguity among domestic and foreign scholars. The phenomenon of ambiguity is analyzed by reading literature and searching example sentences in the corpus. First of all, through reading the literature to understand the definition and classification of ambiguity. Then the impact of ambiguity on bilingual learners from the phonetic, lexical and grammatical aspects is analyzed. Among them, the grammatical aspect is further divided into the ambiguity of the syntactic plane, the ambiguity of the semantic plane and the ambiguity of the pragmatic aspect; finally, corresponding suggestions for teaching Chinese as a foreign language are put forward from the aspects of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. For teachers, it is not only necessary to help students establish a correct attitude to deal with ambiguity, but also to avoid strange phenomena through some teaching methods such as pinyin or Chinese characters. And to help students develop good study habits, second language learners should really understand the meaning of the sentences, not just memorize each sentence mechanically. At the same time, teachers can create various contexts to help bilingual learners understand sentences and eliminate ambiguity.

Keywords: Chinese ambiguity, the formation of the ambiguity, disambiguation, bilingual acquisition

1. Introduction

Language is not only one of the ties of communication between people, but also one of the important means of communication between people and society. As a language that has been developed for thousands of years, Chinese is very flexible in its usage. In daily language communication, the appearance of ambiguity is inevitable, and everyone is more or less affected by ambiguity. Different accents, sentence breaks, and tones of the same sentence may change the meaning that the speaker wants to express, which is the phenomenon of language ambiguity. Many factors lead to the phenomenon of language ambiguity, which persists in the development of language. Jing investigated the absolute ambiguity and relative ambiguity of the five manifestations of the “NP1+VP1+NP2+VP2+(NP3)” (where NP1 refers to noun phrase 1, VP1 refers to verb phrase 1, NP2 refers to noun phrase 2, VP2 refers to verb phrase 2, NP3 refers to noun phrase 3) ambiguity structure from four aspects: knowledge level, age, identity, and gender. Analysis shows that for

absolute ambiguity, the younger the age, the more sensitive the perception of ambiguity is, and women are more sensitive to ambiguity than men. For relative ambiguity, age and identity have the most obvious influence on the selection of ambiguous univocal items, while knowledge level and gender are not obvious [1]. Therefore, it is necessary to define the concept of “ambiguity”, and then analyze the reasons for the formation of ambiguity, so as to achieve the purpose of eliminating ambiguity. Wu proposed that ambiguity means that when people communicate with each other, a word, phrase, sentence or even a paragraph contains two or more meanings, and there are two or more ways of understanding for the information receiver [2]. Yu pointed out that ambiguity is the understanding of a sentence isolated by taking it out of context without violating grammar and logic. Different interpretations of sentences make it difficult to determine the structure and meaning of this linguistic form [3]. Su pointed out that ambiguity is a common phenomenon in natural languages, and of course, modern Chinese is no exception. Natural language usually refers to a language that naturally evolves with culture, such as Chinese, English, French etc. There are many reasons for ambiguity. In addition to the environment and context of the speaker, there are also the speaker’s posture, tone, and even facial expressions. These factors will affect the listener’s understanding.

This paper first introduces the definition of ambiguity by scholars, and then divides “ambiguity” from the perspective of linguistics, so as to make some suggestions for bilingual learners and teachers of Chinese as a foreign language according to the types of division. Classification of ambiguity can not only help teachers improve their teaching methods, but also help second language learners master Chinese proficiently.

2. The Connotation and Development of Ambiguity

Ambiguity is a very old topic. From the perspective of linguistic research, human research on ambiguity can be traced back to ancient Greece. It was Plato who first started to study ambiguity, and then his student Aristotle conducted a more comprehensive discussion of ambiguity. Galen (129-199) in ancient Rome was the first to systematically study ambiguity [4].

Many Chinese scholars put forward their understandings on the phenomenon of ambiguity in Chinese. Zhao’s Chinese Ambiguity marked the beginning of the study of Chinese ambiguity [5]. After the 1960s, Chinese scholars showed a more specific trend in the study of Chinese ambiguity. However, some scholars used the term “ambiguity” arbitrarily in the research process, which leads to confusion between ambiguity and concepts such as polysemy, generalization, and vagueness. Therefore, many scholars participated in the discussion, Hu explained ambiguity by distinguishing between “polysemy” and “ambiguity”. He believes that polysemy refers to the fact that it is a phrase in form, but in fact, it is two or more phrases of different types crossed together, polysemy is different from ambiguity. Polysemy is a static and normal language phenomenon, while ambiguity is dynamic. When people explained polysemy, a polysemous sentence may have two or more meanings, these different meanings are the ambiguity of language [6]. Wang and Jia proposed that there are many understandings of ambiguity, and the general understanding means that one language form can be understood as two or more semantics. Ambiguity is also called “homomorphism”, which focuses on content and form. There are certain conditions for the emergence of ambiguity. That is to say, ambiguity must be premised on homomorphism, and there will be no ambiguity if it is different [7].

According to the existing research results, Chinese scholars roughly divided Chinese ambiguity into phonetic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity and grammatical ambiguity [8]. Among them, grammatical ambiguity is divided into syntactic plane, semantic plane and pragmatic plane, that is, three plane theories. Scholars used the three-plane theory to make the research on Chinese ambiguity more systematic and holistic. In addition, it can help Chinese learners master certain regularities of Chinese ambiguous sentences, thereby reducing the difficulty of Chinese learning.

3. The Influence of Ambiguity on Bilingual Learners

In this section, the obstacles caused by three aspects of phonological ambiguity, lexical ambiguity and grammatical ambiguity to second language learners are analyzed.

3.1. Phonetic Ambiguity

Phonetic ambiguity refers to the ambiguity caused by the same voice. In Chinese, some Chinese characters are polyphonic, that is, the same Chinese character has more than one pronunciation, and some Chinese characters are homophones, that is, the same pronunciation but represent different Chinese characters. This special phenomenon is likely to cause the receiver of the message to not correctly understand the meaning expressed by the sender of the message.

Firstly, Polyphonic characters may lead to ambiguity. When there is a Chinese character with multiple pronunciations in a sentence, the sentence is likely to cause ambiguity in written expression. For example, “So far, he still owes 1,000 yuan”, if “still” means “huán” in Chinese, the sentence means “so far, he has repaid 1,000 yuan owed”; if “still” means “hái” in Chinese, the sentence means “so far, he still owes 1,000 yuan”.

Secondly, Homophones may lead to ambiguity. When a sentence has homophones, it is easy to cause ambiguity in oral communication. For example, “the products bù (all/not) qualified”, if “bù” refers to the Chinese character “部” which means “all” in English, then the meaning expressed in this sentence is “all products are qualified”; if the Chinese character “bù” represents is “不” which means “not” in English, it has the exact opposite meaning, that is, “the products are not qualified”.

3.2. Lexical Ambiguity

Lexical ambiguity refers to the ambiguity caused by the meaning of words. This type of ambiguity is different from phonetic ambiguity. Phonetic ambiguity can be eliminated by written or oral expression according to the cause of ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity may occur not only in oral expression, but also in written language. It is also different from grammatical ambiguity. Lexical ambiguity is a problem with the scope of word meaning and does not involve the structure of sentences.

Firstly, Polysemy may lead to ambiguity. Polysemy means that the words contained in a sentence have more than one meaning. For example, “the book is yellow”, where “yellow” can mean “the color of the book is yellow” or “this book is a pornographic book”; another example is “I like cuckoo”, in which “cuckoo” can represent either “cuckoo flower” or “cuckoo bird”, so it is impossible to judge which one this sentence refers to.

Secondly, Homophones and homographs may lead to ambiguity. Homophone and homograph refer to words that have the same pronunciation as Chinese characters, but have different meanings. For example, “Xiao Ming looks a little angry/vigor today”, in Chinese, vigor can mean that the person seems to be alive, therefore this sentence can be understood as “Xiao Ming looks energetic today”; and also can refer to an emotional state, and the sentence means “Xiao Ming looks very angry today”.

3.3. Grammatical Ambiguity

Grammatical ambiguity refers to the ambiguity caused by grammatical factors. In this section, the grammatical ambiguity is analyzed according to syntactic plane, semantic plane and pragmatic ambiguity.

Among the three planes of grammar, the syntactic plane is the foundation, and the analysis of the semantic plane and the pragmatic plane is carried out on the basis of the syntactic plane. Liu and Gong put forward that syntactic ambiguity can be divided into structural level ambiguity and

structural relationship ambiguity according to the syntactic segmentation method and the characteristic relationship between sentence components [9]. For example, “owner of three puppies”, this sentence can express “a person has three puppies”, and can also express “the three people here are the owners of three puppies”. This sentence is a typical ambiguity caused by the unclear sentence structure. Since Chinese has no obvious morphological signs and changes in parts of speech, ambiguities caused by structural relationships appear. For example, “study file”, the sentence can mean “This document needs to be learned” or “This is a learning document”. The relationship between “learning” and “document” can be either a positive structure or a verb-object structure.

Zhao pointed out that the ambiguity caused by factors at the semantic level is semantic ambiguity, that is, the ambiguity phenomenon caused by the uncertainty of semantic orientation as a whole [9]. For example, Zhao has a classic example sentence for researching ambiguity “Chickens don’t eat”, due to the ambiguity between the agent and the recipient, it is impossible to accurately judge whether the sentence refers to “the chicken has stopped eating the feed” or “the person has stopped eating the chicken”. In the same way, another example is “I go to class”, this sentence can mean “I am a teacher, I have gone to teach students”, or “I am a student, I have gone to class”. The above two example sentences are ambiguities caused by the ambiguity of the relationship between the semantic components, and the listeners cannot accurately understand the meaning that the speaker wants to express according to the information given in the sentence.

Liu and Gong believe that “pragmatics” includes the concept of “context”, but it is not completely equivalent to “context”. In addition to context, pragmatic ambiguity also includes many factors such as the listener’s understanding, the speaker’s purpose, and the identities of the two parties in the dialogue. They believe that there are many reasons for the ambiguity in expression and understanding between the two parties in the communication, which may be at the phonetic level, at the lexical level, or at the syntactic or semantic level. Besides, although the sentence may not have ambiguity at the phonetic, lexical, syntactic, and semantic levels, if it is combined with a specific context such as contextual context, cultural context, etc., ambiguity will arise [10]. Therefore, in pragmatic ambiguity, second language learners must rely on some additional conditions to judge the exact meaning of the sentence expression.

4. Suggestions for Teaching Improvement

In view of the fact that ambiguity is a difficult point for every bilingual learner, some suggestions for the process of teaching Chinese are put forward below, including guidance for students and suggestions for teaching.

4.1. Improvement Measures in the Teaching Process

First of all, teachers should guide students to correct their learning attitudes. Because ambiguity is a difficult point in linguistics, students may have negative learning emotions when they are repeatedly frustrated. Zhao found through a survey that “learners who like ambiguous sentences have a higher average recognition rate of ambiguous sentences” [11]. Therefore, teachers need to guide students to express their opinions in the teaching, and give timely encouragement when students answer correctly, so as to establish a positive cycle. When students answer incorrectly, they should not directly tell students the correct understanding, but should create the same environment to guide students. Through positive psychological hints, students can gradually eliminate their fear of ambiguity.

Secondly, teachers need to help students establish correct learning methods about ambiguity. Due to the particularity of language ambiguity, when analyzing sentences, students should not just memorize the meaning of each word that appears in the sentence like memorizing words. This is not a process of mechanical memory. The cognition of sentences should be based on language territory.

At the same time, when students read a sentence, they should read the complete sentence before comprehending it, which requires context substitution instead of a one-sided understanding of the sentence under the influence of their own original thinking.

Finally, in the process of language teaching, teachers should create various contexts to help students understand. Due to the special nature of the teaching profession, usually positive and encouraging words appear in the classroom, and due to the special status of foreigners, bilingual learners have always been in a relatively relaxed language environment. Such a language environment is not conducive to language learning. A proficient bilingual learner should be able to master the relatively harsh language, which requires teachers to create a similar language environment in the classroom to help students understand.

4.2. Countermeasures for Different Ambiguity Phenomena

For the ambiguity caused by polyphonic characters, teachers can choose to mark pin yin to help students eliminate ambiguity during the teaching process. For students who are still at the beginning of language learning, they can use the method of stress for teaching; for the ambiguity caused by homophones, teachers can complete the sentences during the teaching process, so that students can clearly understand what the object is referring to. Based on the ambiguity caused by vocabulary problems, for the ambiguity caused by polysemous words, teachers can try their best to choose words without too much meaning for language teaching, or choose more appropriate words to replace; for the ambiguity caused by homophones and homographs, teachers can add some descriptions about ambiguous words in sentences, so as to help students understand the meaning of sentences more accurately.

Regarding pragmatic ambiguity, Yu pointed out that ambiguity in context is not interference, but an art in language, which can be extended to teaching Chinese as a foreign language [12]. Zang believes that context can be divided into positive ambiguity and negative ambiguity. At the same time, he pointed out that the ambiguity that makes it difficult for students to understand the knowledge points taught by teachers in the process of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is negative ambiguity. Positive ambiguity means that in order to achieve a better expression effect, the author will use the ambiguity of vocabulary, semantics, and sentence structure to create ambiguity through a specific language environment to meet the needs of the article background and express emotions. Positive ambiguity in the context can make second language learners perceive the charm of language, thereby stimulating students' confidence in language learning [13].

When using contextual teaching, teachers need to set up specific, real and typical contexts [14]. Concreteness means that the example sentences need to be specific to the language environment of the context, and teachers need to introduce the background and purpose of the communication and dialogue; authenticity and typicality mean that teachers need to pay attention to whether the example sentences are commonly used in daily life, and whether the knowledge students learn in class can be used in life. Contextual teaching that satisfies these three points is meaningful.

5. Conclusion

The phenomenon of ambiguity is complex. On the basis of summarizing previous studies on ambiguity, this paper analyzes the definition of ambiguity, the types of ambiguity, the impact of ambiguity on second language learners and some suggestions in the process of teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

This paper divides ambiguity into phonetic ambiguity, lexical ambiguity, grammatical ambiguity and pragmatic ambiguity from the perspective of the internal composition of the language system. Based on this, some suggestions are put forward for both teachers and students in teaching Chinese

as a foreign language. For teachers, it is necessary to help students overcome their fear of ambiguity, and to use stress, standard pronunciation, and not confuse students with words with too many meanings during the teaching process. They can also use contextual teaching methods based on authenticity, specificity, and typicality to help students eliminate ambiguity. For students, in addition to overcoming their own negative psychology about “ambiguity”, they can also use the advantages of being in an immersive language environment to learn.

The understanding of Chinese teaching is still very shallow, and it requires not only rich linguistic knowledge, but also rich teaching experience to put forward suggestions which are relatively lacking in this paper. Future research will be based on the causes of ambiguity to design Chinese as a foreign language teaching curriculum, which has achieved the purpose of reducing negative ambiguity, while using positive ambiguity to help bilingual acquisition better master Chinese.

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