Relevance Theory and Lexical Pragmatics: a Study of tou in Chinese

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1. Introduction

A predominant tendency of current lines of research in relevance theory is the view that people often construct an ad hoc concept during utterance interpretation by broadening or narrowing an encoded concept. In the relevance-theoretic framework, the great majority of the concepts we form in our minds are unlexicalised concepts, which are constructed ad hoc by selecting bits of information from memory and adjusting concepts that do have a stable entry (Sperber and Wilson, 1998). In other words, a lexically encoded concept triggers a pragmatic process whose result is a different concept, narrower or broader than the lexical concept (Carston, 2002: 322). In this paper, I will discuss an issue that arises in this relevance-driven mechanism: the process of the on-line pragmatic adjustment that fine-tunes the interpretation of virtually every word in context. Take the Chinese word *tou* 'head' for example. I aim to offer some evidence from Chinese about how the relevance theoretic-line of thought results in a satisfactory account of the overall interpretation to meet a word's expectations of relevance. To fully understand this pragmatic adjustment process, I will first present an outline of relevance theory in the following section.

2. Pragmatic background: some accounts of relevance theory

Relevance theory (Sperber &Wilson 1986/1995; see also references therein) is based on a definition of relevance and two general principles: the *Cognitive Principle* that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance; and the *Communicative Principle* that every utterance creates expectations of relevance. Relevance theory claims that human cognition naturally tends to maximize relevance, and this is captured by one of the two general principles mentioned above. According to relevance theory, relevance can be defined as a property of inputs to cognitive processes: an utterance, thought, memory, action, sound, sight, smell, and so on.

   It is necessary to point out that it follows from the *Cognitive Principle of Relevance* that human attention and processing resources are allocated to information that seems relevant. Furthermore, the *Communicative Principle of Relevance* maintains that the speaker, by the very act of addressing someone, creates an expectation of optimal relevance; in other words, one communicates that their utterance is most relevant, or at least relevant enough to be worth processing. Moreover, relevance theorists note that inferential comprehension, which starts with the recovery of a linguistically-encoded meaning, has to be contextually enriched in a variety of ways to yield a full-fledged speaker's meaning. On this approach, understanding any utterance, be it literal, narrow or broad, can be reduced to seeing its intended relevance; explicit

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communication is no longer seen as purely a matter of decoding, but involves an element of inferential adjustment since there is no presumption of literalness. Such linguistically encoded meaning gives only a clue to the speaker's meaning.

In what follows, I will make a preliminary analysis of the Chinese word *tou* 'head' based on its collocational possibilities. The approach to lexical pragmatics developed within the pragmatic framework of relevance theory by Sperber and Wilson is utilized to examine its application for such intended meaning in speech.

3. Decoding and inference in concept construction

It is widely agreed in pragmatics that utterances are automatically decoded by a language module into a certain semantic representation or logical form, which serves as automatic input in the process of pragmatic inference. Guided by the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure, the aim of the hearer is to develop this logical form at the explicit level and complement it at the implicit level so as to arrive at a hypothesis about the set of communicated assumptions that constitute the speaker's meaning. The following expression shows us the inferential process of understanding a vague concept:

(1) *Ta shi ge tu-tou*[1]
    [he is MOD[2] bald]
    'He is bald.'

As in (1), *tutou* 'bald' is semantically vague and differs conceptually from the speaker's original thought. In daily conversation, *bald* does not mean one has absolutely no hair on their head. If BALD refers to having no hair, the question of how much hair must remain on one's head for it to not be regarded as BALD becomes relevant? Its interpretation is ambiguous. Hence, if the speaker wishes to express their thought exactly, that one has no hair on their head at all, they need to use words corresponding to this concept in detail. For instance, the speaker must add explicit information (explicature) in order to derive implicit meaning (implicature), such as *Peter is very/absolutely bald; Peter has no hair (at all); I can see the skin of his skull*.

This example of a loosely used term illustrates that the meaning of a linguistically encoded word is merely a starting point for inferential comprehension. The hearer is often satisfied with a loose interpretation which falls short of being strictly literal. This looseness seems to be due, essentially, to the ineffability of the concept: the language of thought is richer than natural language (Sperber and Wilson, 1995: 285). An essential claim of relevance theory is that utterance interpretation often involves a considerable amount of background inference. According to this view, such expectations of relevance raised by an utterance may make a certain hypothesis about the intended implications highly accessible to the hearer before an explicauture is fully formulated. Below are some examples of *tou* 'head' employing inference:

(2) *Gongtou: An ren-tou gei, mei-ren wu-shi yuan*.

   Foreman: [according head give everyone 50 yuan]

   Foreman: "You will be paid 50 yuan per head."

In Chinese, it is customary to count people by their head. This metonymic phenomenon is based on the fact that one person has only one head. As in (2), the workers ask the foreman about their pay and are told by the foreman that everyone will get 50 Chinese yuan. The point of this sentence is that utterance understanding depends mainly on the kind of common knowledge mentioned above. The comprehension process of (2) shows us that the activation of a certain concept (e.g., HEAD) immediately induces other semantically related concepts (e.g., PERSON).

   Concepts encoded by the spoken word allow access to a range of encyclopedic assumptions in our collective memory about the entities a concept denotes. The hearer will consider this information in the order of their accessibility. The activation of the concept HEAD, for instance, activates such encyclopedic assumptions as 'the head is the primary controller of the body', 'the head is the main site for thinking and other intellectual activity', etc. MENTAL FUNCTION (thinking, knowing and understanding) IS PERCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE (seeing). The importance of eyes is apparent and in Chinese they are generally paralleled with head. This kind of comprehension process can be illustrated by the parallel expressions of *tou* 'head' and *mu* 'eye' in (3):

(3) *Ta shi women de tou-mu.*

   [he is our head eye]

   'He is the head (leader) of our group.'

In Chinese, the head and the eyes can be paired together to derive such an extended meaning as "someone in charge of or leading an organization, group, etc." The physical basis for the development of these connotations is most likely due to the fact that the head is the topmost body part. When giving illustrations, for example listing names vertically on a board according to the order of seniority, we generally start from the upper end and put number one or the best of something in the highest position (GOOD IS UP). Accordingly, a leader with power (POWER IS UP) typically stands on top in order to be seen by those without power. A literal understanding of *toumu* 'head' in (3) will not satisfy the hearer's expectation of relevance. Thus, it is appropriate to assume that a loose interpretation, based on a few highly accessible encyclopedic properties, will help the hearer develop an explicature to make the utterance relevant in the expected way.

   In short, based on the discussion above, it is important to recognize that linguistically encoded material is not immediately accepted as the speaker's intended meaning, but merely taken as evidence from which to infer the meaning one intends to communicate. Hence, an encoded concept can, and often does, differ from the concept used to communicate. The hearer's task is to recover the latter by means of the former (with the help of background knowledge) via inference. This kind of inferential processing is generally

linked to the construction of ad hoc categories and new representations denoting these categories. Having demonstrated the importance of backwards inference, I will proceed in the following section with an explanation of how the hearer bridges the gap between encoded and expressed concepts.

4. Pragmatic adjustments of conceptual encoding

Relevance theorists have taken the view that a concept expressed by a familiar word can contrast with a concept encoded by the use of that word in various ways. The new concept may be narrower or broader and when constructed in the ad hoc fashion will be considered appropriately close to the one the speaker intended as a constituent of her thoughts and the utterance's explicature. This may require some pragmatic adjustments. I will first illustrate this process with an example that involves narrowing.

4.1. Narrowing

In relevance theory, the concept encoded by a word may be broader than the concept the speaker intends to convey on that particular occasion. This is a case of lexical narrowing, in which pragmatic adjustment contributes to the explicitly communicated content of an utterance. Examples of narrowing can be seen in (4-5):

(4) *Ta shige you tounao*[3] *de ren.*

 [He is a have head brain MOD person]

 'He is an intelligent person.'

It appears that (4) is a case in which the encoded concept is narrowed down by its context to select only a subset of *tou* 'head'. In this case, in order to understand the intended meaning, the hearer has to infer what particular kind of head this is. The encoded concept *tounao* is thus used as a starting point to understand the utterance in (4), which is narrowed to a high-functioning head (intelligent person) rather than the literal interpretation. Pragmatically, the modifier "big" conveys vague ideas, and only through comparison and association can the intended meaning be roughly deduced.

 Therefore, by assuming that *tounao* 'head' does not mean to suggest the broadly encoded concept of HEAD but rather the narrower concept of HEAD* (i.e. head with great intellectual ability), the hearer can thus arrive at an contextual interpretation which satisfies their expectation of relevance by deriving the speaker's implication of a high-functioning head. In relevance-driven processing, one is justified in making this assumption because finding an interpretation that yields enough implicit information to make the utterance relevant in the expected way demands the least amount of effort. In the following sentence, expectation of relevance is quite limited and specific since the decoded concept provides more encyclopedic information than is actually needed. Consider:

(5) *Tamen dou shi you-tou-you-lian de shehui-mingliu.*

 [they all are have-head-have-face MOD noted-public-figures]

'They are all noted public persons with much prestige.'

As in (5), celebrities are persons who "have heads and faces", namely, persons with much prestige commanding much respect. In this example, the goal of narrowing is to account for the fact that the concept communicated by head and face is used to convey a more specific sense than the encoded one, resulting in a restriction of the denotation of person. Consequently, the concept *youtouyoulian* '(persons) have heads and faces' is understood as being more specific than its lexically encoded counterparts in that it only denotes 'prestigious, famous, and respected persons'. Here, following the path of least effort in computing cognitive effects, the hearer takes the encoded concept PERSON together with their background knowledge as a starting point to infer the concept that the speaker wishes to communicate. The consequence of taking the path of least effort is that one sets up an ad hoc concept of PERSON* on-line and starts to consider the encyclopedic assumptions in the order of their accessibility until their expectations of relevance are satisfied, at which point they stop.

The examples analyzed so far involve the narrowing of an encoded concept, but there are other times that require some degree of broadening, namely, omitting a logical or defining feature from the strict and literal usage of a word. These will be presented in the following section.

4.2. Approximation

To illustrate the notion of approximation, consider what is most likely communicated by the highlighted lexical items of the following sentences. Evidence for this point can be found in the analyses of such examples as (6) and (7):

(6) *Ta zhang-de fang-tou da-er.*
    [he looks square-head big ear]
    'He has a square* head and big ears.'

(6) is a case involving the broadening of the denotation of an encoded concept. It is apparent that the concept communicated does not include the logical or definitional properties of the concept decoded, but is used on this specific occasion to denote a broader set of entities, some of which (strictly speaking) fall outside that definition. For instance, the word *fang* 'square' has a strict definition (e.g., exact number, geometric figure, etc.). However, it is apparent that the head referred to in (6) is unlikely to be square in shape; rather, it is an approximate square. Therefore, *fang* 'square' only represents a vague concept of shape and the hearer thus needs to weaken the concept to mean something like 'roughly square' in the comprehension process. In this case, one can only understand that the head, in some way, is modified by a geometrical term, but not a geometric figure with four equal sides and four right angles. Consider another possible case in (7):

(7) *Ta de hua ling-ren tou-da.*

   [his words make person head-big]

   'What he said makes my head become big*.〞(i.e. makes me annoyed)

What is the notion of bigness in *lingrentouda* 'make one's head become big'? What is the appropriate degree of *da* 'big'? In this expression, the use of *da* 'big' provides us a more general sense while the answer to this question is subject to various interpretations. Pragmatically, the relatively strict sense of 'big' falls outside its linguistically specified denotation, and as a result an ad hoc concept exceeding the boundaries of the lexically encoded concept is constructed. In the comprehension process of (7), the hearer needs to process the information obtained from the encoded concept and not its logical entry (which if considered is quickly omitted) that entails geometric perfection. The concept resulting from processing (7) merely resembles the concept linguistically encoded, acting as a guide for inferring the speaker's meaning.

   In sum, in processing (6-7), the speakers do not aim at literalness but at newly created concepts; the extension of such pragmatically inferred ad hoc concepts as SQUARE* and BIG* is more inclusive in certain respects than that of the lexical concepts of square and big. Besides the vagueness of a relative concept such as the modifier *big* in (7), there are still more radical cases of concept broadening to express vague concepts in casual conversation, such as hyperbole discussed below.

4.3. Hyperbole

Given the assumptions of relevance theory, hyperbolic processes offer us less than a strictly literal interpretation of a thought in varying degrees. As Sperber and Wilson (1995: 233) suggest, there are a number of quite ordinary situations in which a literal utterance is not so optimally related. I will illustrate this point with examples (8-9):

(8) *wan-tou zan-dong* (million-heads pierce move) 'millions of people crowd'

Culture-specifically speaking, the Chinese expression *wantou* 'million heads' does not have the kind literal denotation indicated by the number. Rather, it is hyperbole for describing a spectacular scene. Imagine that you want to tell someone about an unprecedented rally of tens of thousands of people. One is likely to choose the expression in (8) to produce a vague concept of hyperbole differing from the actual amount instead of stating it literally with an exact number. As is evident in (8), all implicatures derived by the hearer have to be inferentially warranted and the ad hoc concept plays a crucial role in this.

   In casual conversation, the speaker does not necessarily state the exact number of people. One can say it vaguely using hedges like:〝about, around, roughly.〞Consider another expression in (9):

(9) *qian-tou wan-xu* (thousand-heads ten thousand clues) 'a myriad of thoughts' (i.e. extremely
                  complicated and difficult to unravel)

In (9), the adjectives *qia*n 'thousand' and wan 'ten thousands' are for conveying the idea of "confusion of one's head" instead of their lexically encoded meanings. Noticeably, no literal concept is intended to be tested first. The encoded concept of 'thousand heads and ten thousand clues' is merely used as a way to derive a range of true implications for one to endorse. At this point, processing assumptions made accessible by an encoded concept also results in an adjustment of the denotation of this concept so that a new concept can arise ad hoc on-line. This process of pragmatically fine-tuning an encoded concept takes place as a natural by-product of the search for an optimally relevant interpretation, which can be attributed as the speaker's intended meaning, as we can see in (8-9).

It is worth mentioning that since the pragmatic adjustment of the encoded concepts alone may not warrant the intended implications (e.g., the implication that one is very confused), pragmatic adjustment at word level may need to be complemented with pragmatic adjustment at phrasal level. As a result, the hearer may construct a phrasal concept (e.g., [*qiantouwanxu*]*) whose denotation is broader than that of the compositional meaning of the phrase.

Based on the mental comprehension demonstrated above, it seems reasonable to argue that this pragmatic process also operates at the phrase level when one wishes to deduce the meaning of phrasal expressions intended by the speaker, as in (8-9) (cf. Glucksberg, 2001). It is the ad hoc (phrasal) concept resulting from the process of deriving an optimally relevant interpretation that will be taken for the concept that the speaker intended as a constituent of their utterance's explicature. In the next section, I will consider how metaphorically ad hoc concepts contribute to the explicit content of an utterance.

4.4. Metaphor

One crucial implication of the relevance-theoretic approach to lexical pragmatics is its treatment of metaphor. In contrast to cognitive linguistics, relevance theory sees metaphor interpretation as essentially an inferential process; making the assumption that decoded meaning is not directly accepted as the speaker's intended meaning, but merely as evidence to this end. The goal of pragmatic analysis of metaphor is to explain how hearers recognize the intended meaning of a metaphorical utterance in context.

According to relevance theory, metaphor and other figurative language are not, as Grice claimed, deliberate and blatant violations of the maxim of truthfulness, but simply varieties of loose talk. As will be presented below, the hearer takes both an encoded concept and its assumptions from memory as input to an inferential process in which they aim to derive the set of assumptions that the speakers intended to communicate. Consider this example of a metaphorical utterance:

(10) (Mother to son):*Ni shi yige zhutou a, zhe-me jiandan ye buhui.*

                [you are a pig head PRT, so easy PRT can not]

                'You are such an idiot that you can't do such an easy thing.'

In processing (10), the hearer takes any assumptions made accessible by the encoded concept as potential inputs for an inferential process designed to make an utterance relevant in the expected way. Following

the path of least effort, the hearer starts to consider a few highly activated assumptions about certain encyclopedic entries with encoded concepts. For instance, decoding the concept encoded by the word *zhutou* 'pig head' in (10) allows the hearer access to some accompanying assumptions about pigs (e.g. they are very slow to respond, they are insensitive, their minds lack flexibility, etc) as additional contextual assumptions. These assumptions frame a context in the order of their accessibility for the purpose of deriving a hypothesis about the speaker's intended meaning (e.g. the son is very stupid, he needs to improve himself, his mother is unhappy with this situation, etc). In this case, the assumptions considered in processing the encoded concept PIG HEAD, which is broadened to PIG HEAD*, contributes to the derivation of the intended effects. Meanwhile, we can infer that the pragmatically equivalent meaning intended by the speaker is equivalent to (11):

(11) You are an idiot.

If the speaker wishes to avoid ambiguity in conveying their intended cognitive effects, they can proceed with the literal language of (11) to ensure clear communication. Furthermore, if the speaker wants to complement it at an implicit level, the proposition expressed is communicated along with the plausible implicature, as in the metaphorical use of loose talk shown in (10). In interpreting (10), the hearer will process the highly activated properties of being unable to respond quickly. However, the hearer will not consider the less activated property possibly salient in other contexts, such as being a pig.

As we can see in (10), decoding the encoded concept of PIG HEAD permits a range of logical implications and encyclopedic assumptions. A general idea underlying this hypothesis is that the stock of concepts constructed is more communicable than the stock of words available in a given language to encode those concepts. Let us consider another case:

(12) *Ta zhen shi ge hua-tou.*
     [he really PRT a slippery head]
     'He is really very slippery.'

We find that the process of lexical pragmatic adjustment that fine-tunes the interpretation of (12) is in no way different from that of any other case above. Let us begin with just the most accessible assumptions about the encyclopedic entry of the encoded concept of "slippery." The hearer processes them in the wider context of the utterance together with other hypotheses about explicatures and implicatures, such as the assumptions that a slippery person is selfish, both principled and flexible, highly undisciplined and so on. It follows from the relevance-theoretic comprehension procedure that the hearer should consider the most accessible assumptions first, and proceed through the accessibility hierarchy until they reach an interpretation that is sufficiently relevant. As a result of this process, the hearer constructs a new *ad hoc* concept of SLIPPERY HEAD*.

According to relevance theory, the interpretation process depends on the hearer's expectations of

relevance for a certain utterance (with different utterances generating different expectations). Encyclopedic assumptions activated by an encoded concept are considered in the order of their accessibility until those particular expectations are satisfied. A simple word such as *huatou* 'slippery head' may thus be used to convey a wide array of different unlexicalised concepts (e.g. SLIPPERY HEAD*, SLIPPERY HEAD**). The various fine-tuning of concepts encoded by this word in memory is a function of different accessibility orderings and expectations of relevance, both sensitive to contextual specifics. In the following examples, the hearer's expectations of relevance add an extra degree of activation to encyclopedic assumptions, making certain hypotheses about implicatures highly accessible. This, in turn, leads by backwards inference to the enrichment of the explicit content in a optimally relevant direction. Hence, if the hearer has contextual details about *huatou* 'slippery head', they will likely derive the corresponding interpretations.

(13) Zhen-*xing-a, ta zhen shi ge hua-tou.*
    [really great PRT he really are a slippery head]
    'Great, he is really very slippery."
(14) *Bu-guan-zen-yang, ta zhen shi ge hua-tou.*
    [no matter how, he really PRT a slippery head]
    'After all, he is really very slippery."

No metaphor (or utterance) is processed in the absence of a context. Let us suppose that the metaphor above was uttered during a discussion about the difficulty of dealing with an especially sticky individual. Motivated by the search for relevance, linguistically encoded meaning is contextually enriched to yield a hypothesis about the speaker's intended meaning. In processing the expression of *zhenxinga* 'great' in (13), the assumption that the speaker appreciates the referent *ta* 'he' directs the hearer towards a particular assumption associated to the encoded concept of SLIPPERY HEAD (e.g., the assumption that 'he' is a creative and flexible person). This denotes a kind of positive SLIPPERY HEAD that implies energy and drive for innovation. However, processing the same word in a different situation in which the speaker has a derogatory sense, as in (14), the hearer may infer that 'he' is an opportunist. Although the same word, *huatou* 'slippery head', is used, selective processing of encyclopedic assumptions yields a range of different implications in each case. It is the derivation of these implications which allows the utterance to achieve relevance in the expected way and lead the hearer to perceive the intended meaning as relatively transparent. In short, in different contexts, the consideration of a different subset of the encyclopedic assumptions associated with the word *huatou* 'slippery head' results in different implications, and so in different interpretations for satisfying the hearer's expectations of relevance.

    To conclude, metaphor is a form of loose language usage that is approached with fairly precise expectations of optimal relevance. They are processed following the same comprehension procedure until those expectations are satisfied in the same manner as approximation or hyperbole.

5. Concluding remarks

Unlike many existing pragmatic approaches, relevance theory not only acknowledges the gap between the concept encoded by a word and the concept expressed by a speaker in using that word on a particular occasion, but also aims to explain how the hearer bridges the gap between the concept encoded and the concept expressed. This gap may form in at least two ways. Firstly, the concept encoded by a word may be more general than the concept that the speaker intends to convey by using the word on that particular occasion, such as the case of narrowing. Secondly, the encoded concept may be narrower or more specific than the concept the speaker intends to convey on that occasion. In this case, examples include approximation, hyperbole and metaphor. An essential point about these forms is that the same process of conceptual adjustment is at work in deriving an ad hoc (invented) meaning. Meanwhile, it is this pragmatically inferred concept that is taken to be appropriately close to the one intended as a constituent of the speaker's thoughts, while the linguistically encoded concept (the logical form and its constituent concepts) is taken as merely a guide in inferring the speaker's meaning. This process of pragmatically fine-tuning encoded concepts takes place as a natural by-product of the search for an optimally relevant interpretation. This consequently determines whether the utterance is understood literally, approximately, hyperbolically or metaphorically.

In this paper, based on a collection of Chinese examples, I have confirmed the creative nature of ad hoc concept construction. Satisfying the expectations of relevance generated from a particular utterance is the motivating factor. In sum, we can construct concepts in an ad hoc fashion so as to fulfill particular communicative/interpretive goals; and, our pragmatic inferential abilities are advanced enough to fine-tune linguistically encoded conceptual materials. As a result of this fine-tuning, the hearer may construct slightly different interpretations. Hence, it is appropriate to argue that the construction of new conceptual representations is essentially a creative process, with the same pragmatic inferential process at work whether the interpretation involves narrowing or broadening.

Notes:

1. In this paper, the spell sound adopted here for the examples is based on *pinyin*, the standard pronunciation system used in mainland Chinese. Word-for-word literal glosses are provided in the brackets following each example, which precede a translation of conceptual proximity.
2. In the glossing of sentential examples, CL=classifier, MOD=modifier marker, and PRT=particle.
3. In Chinese, the two basic body-part terms for the head are *tou* 'head' and *nao* 'head', the latter being a more formal counterpart of the former.

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From a relevance-theoretic perspective, this paper attempts to present evidence from Chinese in support of the claim that the ad hoc concept construction is essentially a creative process, based on a collection of Chinese examples which involves tou 'head'. On the relevance-theoretic approach outlined in this paper, the conceptual adjustment of encoded concept of Chinese tou 'head' may require some pragmatic adjustments of broadening or narrowing. This process of pragmatically fine-tuning encoded concept takes place as a natural by-product of the search for an optimally relevant interpretation and satisfying the expectations of relevance generated from a particular utterance is its motivating factor. As a result of this fine-tuning, the hearer may construct slightly different interpretations. Consequently, the utterance is understood literally, approximately, hyperbolically or metaphorically.

Key words: relevance theory, ad hoc concept construction, tou 'head'