

A Conversation Analysis of Dialogues in “Young Sheldon” from the Perspective of Politeness Principle

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Abstract: The Politeness Principle plays a vital role in daily communication and is a guarantee of successful communication activities. Young Sheldon, an American series premiered in 2017, focuses on the life of Sheldon’s family, which contains a large number of conversations that against the Politeness Principle. In this paper, I study the conversations in Young Sheldon, count all the dialogues that against the Politeness Principle, and analyze the conversational implicature and effects of pragmatics. Results show that the violation of Approbation Maxim and Tact Maxim has the highest frequency in all dialogues, while the violation of Generosity Maxim the fewest occurrences. The analysis indicates that the dialogues that against the Politeness Principle show the characters’ selfishness and indifference, and have the discourse effect of reflecting humor and hindering the development of relationship, which helps people understand the characters and the plots better and improve their communication skills.

Keywords: Politeness Principle, conversation analysis, Young Sheldon, pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Politeness is a universal phenomenon in human communication, a manifestation of modesty and respect in words and actions when people interact with each other, and also a code of conduct commonly followed by people in different cultures and formed by customs and habits. After the American philosopher H.P. Grice proposed the Cooperation Principle [1], the British linguist Leach expanded Grice's generalization of the meaning of conversation and proposed the Politeness Principle [2]. He believed that people need to follow the Politeness Principle in addition to the Cooperative Principle when engaging in verbal communication. In daily life, the Politeness Principle plays an indispensable role in our communicative activities. When having communication with others, we must consider various factors, use appropriate language, respect to others, and avoid causing misunderstanding and unhappiness. Therefore, the Politeness Principle plays a guiding role in our daily communication and maintenance of interpersonal relationships.

This research aims to apply the Politeness Principle to explore the effect of violating six maxims in daily conversations by examining the conversational implicature arose from dialogues, therefore improving the theoretical system of the Politeness Principle and providing theoretical basis for the innovation of the analysis of Politeness Principle in real conversation. By analyzing and summarizing the characters’ dialogues, it fills the lack of research on analysis of Politeness Principle in Young Sheldon and other television shows, analyzes the nuances of the six maxims, and further promotes the development of pragmatics.

2. Literature review

2.1. Politeness Principle

The Politeness Principle was first proposed by Geoffrey Leech in his book *Principle of Pragmatics* [1], which was divided into six maxims: Tact Maxim, Generosity Maxim, Approbation Maxim, Modesty Maxim, Agreement Maxim and Sympathy Maxim. According to Leech, speakers should make an effort to minimize the harm and maximize the respect to hearers, and conform to the Politeness Principle when having a conversation. After Leech's research, the focus of politeness studies changed to predominantly postmodern discourse analytic paradigm, focusing on conversational context and cultural background rather than the form of conversation.

In recent years, studies regarding Politeness Principle mostly concentrate on cross cultural communication, and social media and digital communication. Huang compares politeness between Chinese and western culture, defining politeness as a social phenomenon, a means to an end, and a social norm. The researcher discusses how cultural values like privacy and individualism affect politeness and stresses the significance to understand these differences for more effective communication. This study highlights that although the Politeness Principles are universal, there are cultural differences in how they are applied and interpreted, necessitating cultural sensitivity and adaptability in communication [3].

Moreover, Chandra examines communication patterns and politeness strategies in social media, particularly in Diponegoro University WhatsApp groups. By applying qualitative methods, the researcher identifies patterns like non-standard language, emotions, and spoken language writing, which are influenced by status, social distance, and imposition. According to the paper, participants adapt to the conversational context through using approaches like positive and negative politeness to create comfortable communication. Chandra concludes that politeness in social media is important for effective communication and is affected by the relationship between people [4].

2.2. conversation analysis of dialogues in Young Sheldon

Current research on Young Sheldon's dialogues mainly focuses on application of politeness theory, identity construction, and social interactions, choosing particular seasons to analyze. For example, Zhang analyzes the conversational implicatures in the first three seasons of "Young Sheldon". This study divides 23 conversations into groups based on whether the characters follow or violate the politeness maxims. The author concludes that viewers' understandings of characters can be enhanced by comprehending these conversational implicatures [5].

What is more, Zhang examines conflictual conversations between parents and children based on the first season of "Young Sheldon", outlining three stages of conflict. This paper finds that characters often violate politeness conventions during conflict to express their dissatisfaction and authority. The author concludes that the adherence and violation of Politeness Principle would impact relationship dynamics and viewers' interpretation [6].

"Young Sheldon" has a large number of dialogues that violate the Politeness Principle, but current studies chose limited data to analyze, probably leading to less comprehensive results. Therefore, this paper investigates dialogues in five seasons of "Young Sheldon", selecting impolite conversations, and categorizes them into six maxims of Politeness Principle.

3. Results

3.1. Statistics of dialogues violating Politeness Principle

This study collected data from five seasons of “Young Sheldon”, accounting for 105 episodes. 511 dialogues were manually chosen to analyze and the statistics are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Statistics of dialogues violating Politeness Principle in “Young Sheldon”.

Kind	Amount	Percentage
Tact Maxim	159	31.1%
Generosity Maxim	23	4.5%
Approbation Maxim	195	38.1%
Modesty Maxim	18	3.5%
Agreement Maxim	73	14.3%
Sympathy Maxim	44	8.5%
Total	512	100%

Table 1 demonstrates that the violation of Approbation Maxim has the highest frequency among the several types of impolite communication, showing that dialogues that express disapproval or criticism are the most commonly used by characters. The Tact Maxim violations that follow suggest that there are a lot of conversations that have the potential to cause hurt or discomfort to others. With the fewest occurrences, the Generosity Maxim implies that there are fewer instances of ungenerous offers or promises made by characters in the series.

3.2. Violation of Tact Maxim

The Tact Maxim requires speakers to be thoughtful by making sure their words are helpful and pleasant and avoiding causing any harm or offense to the listener.

Case 1: In Sheldon’s first class of high school, the teacher introduces him to other students:

Teacher: I’m sure you’re well aware we have a student with us, who, despite his young age, is remarkably gifted. And I expect y’all to make him feel welcome.

Sheldon: Per the student dress and grooming code, this boy’s hair is too long, this boy is wearing sports attire outside of a designated area and this girl’s blouse is diaphanous, which means I can see her brassiere.

On Sheldon’s first day of high school, the teacher praises his talent and other students all give him a warm welcome. However, Sheldon directly points out some of the students’ violation of the dress code in front of everyone, which is not considerate of their feelings or social standing. In other words, Sheldon increases the social cost for other students, causing embarrassment and offense.

The violation of Tact Maxim indicates Sheldon’s traits such as lack of empathy and proper ways for communication, and has an attitude of rules as paramountcy, which are the key aspects of Sheldon’s character development and also create most humor in the show. Audiences can be easily connected to those embarrassed students, and realize the importance of social norms and communication skills. Furthermore, this conversation encourages audiences to be curious about how Sheldon would adapt to high school life and whether other students would accept him, thus audiences can be fully engaged in the show.

3.3. Violation of Generosity Maxim

The Generosity Maxim encourages speakers to make generous contributions and avoid emphasizing their own demands in front of others.

Case 2: Sheldon wants to buy something but he does not consider whether mom is available:

Sheldon: Please, Mom! You're being unfair!

Mom: No.

Sheldon: But I really need those thrust-to-weight ratios.

Mom: Do you see I'm cooking?

Sheldon: Well, take me after dinner.

In this conversation, Sheldon is asking for a priority before his mom and does not consider about whether his mom has time to drive him to the store, and also directly says his mom is being unfair, which is hurtful and disrespectful. In other words, Sheldon only focuses on his own demand and does not offer any contributions to others.

The violation of Generosity Maxim shows Sheldon's traits such as selfish, spoiled, and lack of consideration, which are typical personalities for a gifted child. Sheldon's unreasonable request makes him, a talented genius that is not common in real word, more relatable to audiences because everyone may have such moments of self-centeredness. And this selfish behavior can teach not only Sheldon but also the audiences to concern more about others and learn to compromise.

3.4. Violation of Approbation Maxim

The Approbation Maxim asks speakers to express as more compliments as possible while minimizing criticism to the listener.

Case 3: Sheldon and his dad are discussing about the work his dad used to do:

Sheldon: Were you a good player?

Dad: Eh, not really. I was just bigger than the other kids.

Sheldon: So you compensated for mediocrity by being large.

Sheldon's words directly criticize his dad's ability as a baseball player, questioning his dad's competence. When his dad is being modest, Sheldon does not choose to give comfort or praise. This kind of comment would make his dad feel upset or undervalued. Facing with this situation, Sheldon has the tendency to be honest and analytical, even at the expense of politeness.

The violation of Approbation Maxim illustrates Sheldon's traits such as honest, and prioritizing truth over social needs. This dialogue also serves as a source of humor to the show, as Sheldon's innocence accidentally "hurt" his dad's feeling. What is more, audiences can learn that it is necessary to express compliment to others in order to maintain a positive relationship and help them gain confidence and joy.

3.5. Violation of Modesty Maxim

The Modesty Maxim advises speakers to avoid bragging or drawing attention to their own achievements, thereby fostering a more respectful communication dynamic..

Case 4: When Sheldon enters college, he also receives resentment and alienation from his classmates. Sam, a former classmate of Sheldon's, kindly points out the reason:

Sam: Sheldon, that arrogant attitude is why no one sits with you in class or lunch or ever.

Sheldon: Well, I like to think that they're maintaining a respectful distance out of deference to my intellect.

Sheldon's reply is a clear example of praising himself, as he claims that his classmates' ignorance is a result of their admiration for his superior intelligence. Instead of rethinking his behavior and attitude that might contribute to his social isolation, Sheldon enhances his own image at the expense

of others. This attitude would make Sheldon more isolated and more likely to be excluded by other students, because this arrogant behavior is going to cause resentment among classmates.

The violation of Modesty Maxim reflects Sheldon's traits such as arrogance and a lack of self-awareness. Audiences may find Sheldon's words humorous because of his naive and endearing honesty, even as Sheldon violates the social norms and is impolite to others. It also reinforces the established characteristics that make Sheldon a special and endearing character, laying the stage for further character arcs in which he may grow in his comprehension of social dynamics.

3.6. Violation of Agreement Maxim

The Agreement Maxim encourages speakers to express same views and avoid conflict by emphasizing agreement over disagreement.

Case 5: Tam, a Vietnamese, has dinner with Sheldon's family and they ask about Tam's family:

Mom: So, Tam, tell us about your family. What brings y'all to Texas?

Tam: Well, after the American War...

Dad: You mean the Vietnam War.

Tam: We call it the American War.

In this dialogue, Tam refers to the war as the "American War," which is from Tam's perspective of being Vietnamese, and Sheldon's dad is from a completely opposite perspective. However, this war was an aggressive war launched by American against Vietnam. From Tam's view, the experience was painful, and Sheldon's dad should not correct the name of the war or else it would bring back Tam's memories of the unpleasant past. Later, Tam re-emphasizes the name which also makes the situation awkward. They both do not try to find a common view and avoid disagreement and conflict, therefore causing a brief moment of discomfort and awkwardness at the table.

The violation of Agreement Maxim demonstrates characters' traits such as a strong sense of cultural identity and ignorance to others' feelings. This dialogue highlights the significance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in communication. It also suggests audiences to take cultural difference into consideration for building a positive relationship and reducing conflict when having a conversation.

3.7. Violation of Sympathy Maxim

The Sympathy Maxim requires speakers to be supportive and understanding towards others, and use less expressions that might be seen as cruel, careless, or indifferent.

Case 6: Paige's parents are going to get a divorce and her mom is asking for advice from Sheldon's dad:

Paige's mom: Boy, that doesn't sound like it could work.

Dad: Suit yourself, but I'm having a nice day; you're crying into your peach cobbler.

Facing with someone who needs help and support, instead of offering comfort or understanding, Sheldon's dad chooses to take his happy marriage as a comparison with Paige's mom's awful situation. This response would bring Paige's mom more hard feelings and probably do damage to her marriage.

The violation of Sympathy Maxim shows Sheldon's dad's traits such as lack of empathy and understanding. Sheldon's dad's unusual behavior shows that even kind people can be impatient and thoughtless, making this character more relatable to real people. For audiences, it reminds them of the needs to be considerate and supportive, especially when someone is going through a rough time.

4. Discussion and Findings

As we can see from the table and analysis, the violation of Politeness Principle is common in “Young Sheldon”, illustrating Sheldon and other characters’ personalities such as selfish, cold, blunt and spoiled, and their behaviors such as telling the truth regardless of the situation, mocking others and ignoring others’ feelings, which drives narrative tension and plot development, and makes characters’ traits more memorable.

For viewers, these violations can bring them humor, as observing someone’s misfortune or social faux pas can bring laughter for audience and let them feel relieved and superior [7]. Moreover, breaking social norms contradicts viewers’ expectations and viewers can also see themselves in the impolite behaviors to better connect with characters.

It can be seen that politeness serves multiple functions, not only maintaining harmony and pleasantness in daily life but also addressing issues arising from cultural differences when communicating with foreigners. The violation of politeness and the consequences afterwards can be used to guide both characters and viewers to understand the value of politeness in encouraging positive social dynamics. Over the whole series of “Young Sheldon”, there is a gradual change in characters’ dialogue patterns, with a large number of impolite words exchange to more refined and polite discourse. This shift enhances the storyline and reflects the growth of the characters, especially Sheldon, as they learn to deal with various difficulties of social relationships. Furthermore, the politeness violations emphasize the importance of treating others with respect, empathy and cultural awareness in our daily communication. Through watching the consequences of impolite words and some relative adjustments, the audience is given a practical instruction and a slight warming on the necessity of adopting polite discourse.

5. Conclusion

This study has provided a comprehensive analysis of the dialogues in “Young Sheldon” and highlights that the violation of Politeness Principle offers an insight into characters’ personalities, particularly Sheldon’s, presenting a group of selfish and indifferent, but honesty and naive people. These violations also engage viewers by providing humor and a relatable exploration of social norms, suggesting that it is important to maintain politeness in social interactions to keep harmonious relationships. Furthermore, this paper enriches our understanding of how the Politeness Principle functions in everyday life.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, the distinction between six maxims may not be completely understood and there might be errors in categorizing conversations that could change the results of this study. Second, this study relies solely on Leech’s Politeness Principle, as it may influence the accuracy of the analysis. Third, the cultural background of politeness norms in “Young Sheldon” may not be fully explored in this study, which might change greatly among audiences and affect how the dialogues are interpreted.

To solve these problems, there are several approaches that we can use to improve relevant studies. First, future research could adopt tools such as natural language processing to assist in the classification of dialogues. Second, researchers could combine Leech’s Politeness Principle with other theories such as Brown and Levinson’s Face Theory [8] or Locher and Watts’s Politeness Theory [9]. Third, future studies could consider the cultural diversity of the audience, as a cross-cultural analysis could provide a deeper understanding of how politeness is viewed and used in various societies.

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