



Interpretation of the Positive Functions of English Pragmatic Ambiguity Based on Adaptation Theory

Chu Wei

School of Foreign Languages, East China University of Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Email: y30211516@mail.ecust.edu.cn

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Abstract

Pragmatic ambiguity is a universal linguistic feature. It is often regarded as a negative phenomenon and its positive functions are often ignored. Based on Verschueren's adaptation theory, this paper takes English as an example to study the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity. This paper first introduces the theory of adaptation theory and its correlation with the positive function of pragmatic ambiguity. Then this paper concludes that the positive function of pragmatic ambiguity is the result of the speaker's language choice in the process of language use and his adaptation to the physical world, social world and mental world. This result proves that language use is a dynamic process. In this process, language users choose language on the basis of strategy and adapt to contextual variables and linguistic structural elements.

Subject Areas

Pragmatic Linguistics

Keywords

The Positive Functions of Pragmatic Ambiguity, Adaptation Theory, Communicative Context

1. Introduction

Traced back to the ancient Greek period, ambiguity has a long history. And at that time, ambiguity was studied in the philosophical scope. Early philosophers regard ambiguity as fallacious reasoning. Then Greek linguist Galen puts forward a more comprehensive theory about ambiguity. In Galen's view, language is a tool for transmitting information and language has three effects: positive,

negative and irrelevant. And ambiguity is one of the negative effects of language. Besides, he believes that misunderstanding is caused by ambiguity. And he even considers ambiguity to be a demon of language. However, since Swiss linguist Saussure published *Course in General Linguistics*, linguists have shifted their research direction—from static analysis and description of ambiguity to a dynamic analysis which takes particular communication context into consideration. In 1930, W. Empson began to study ambiguity from the literary point of view and pointed out that interpreting ambiguity is a basic task of semantics. English linguist Geoffrey Leech then explained ambiguity in terms of the relation between syntactic and semantics. He proposed that ambiguity is a one-to-many relationship between syntax and meaning (1987, p. 112) [1]. Also, he believed that ambiguous sentences are sentences that represent more than one proposition (1981, p. 217) [2]. American linguist Dwight Bolinger analyzed ambiguity from both lexical and syntactic aspects. He believed that lexical ambiguity is due to the development and change of word meaning and the special definition of a word in a professional field. Grammar ambiguity arises because the author often attaches importance to words and does not attach importance to structure. (1981, p. 896) [3] Paul Grice studied ambiguity from the perspective of conversational implicature, pointing out that it is speaker's deliberate uses of ambiguity that produces conversational implicature.

In China, linguist Zhu Dexi is the first person who formally puts forward ambiguity. He studies Chinese ambiguity from the syntactic aspect. Then linguist Shen Jiaxuan analyzes and summarizes the types of ambiguity in English. Professors Lin Ruchang and Li Manjue studied ambiguity in language from three levels: phonology, vocabulary and structure.

In general, traditional ambiguity researches focus on static grammatical analysis or description of ambiguity, which always ignores the context. Even when taking context into consideration, these linguists often replace real context with imagined context. As a result, they fail to be aware of the flexibility and variability of language in concrete uses.

While modern linguistics tends to study ambiguity from functional point of view. With the development of linguistics and the deepening of the study of ambiguity, scholars begin to notice that ambiguity, despite its negative effect, can also achieve unexpected good communicative effects in a specific context. (Wu Ligu, 2014: p. 139 [4]; Ruan Xianfeng, 2004: p. 80 [5]; He Chunfang, 2003 [6])

With the development of pragmatics and the further study of ambiguity, researches on pragmatic ambiguity have occurred. As for the definition of pragmatic ambiguity, there have been many controversies. J. Thomas and Yu Dongming define pragmatic ambiguity as “a phenomenon in which the speaker uses uncertain, vague, or indirect utterances in a particular context or context to simultaneously express to the hearer a number of illocutionary acts or illocutionary forces”. (Yu Dongming, 1997, p. 29) [7] This definition involves the basic concept of pragmatic ambiguity. But Xiang Chengdong (2001, p. 86) [8] thinks that the definition above only takes the speaker into account, but ignores the

hearer. It is believed the objective basis of pragmatic ambiguity is that, in the process of verbal communication, because of the influence of contextual factors, even if the speaker's words are clear, the hearer cannot fully understand, or even misunderstand. What's more, sometimes ambiguity is not due to the speaker's use of uncertain factors or indirect words. On the contrary, its discourse meaning is very clear but ambiguity still exists. This phenomenon occurs because of the hearer's deliberate intention to exploit ambiguity or because of contextual factors which affect the hearer.

But generally speaking, pragmatic ambiguity can be divided into two categories: Pragmatic Inferential Ambiguity and Pragmatic Misunderstanding Ambiguity. (Yao Tao, 2009, p. 147) [9] Pragmatic inferential ambiguity regards pragmatic ambiguity as multiple interpretations of the language used in conversation. And pragmatic misunderstanding ambiguity can be further divided into literal misunderstanding ambiguity and intention misunderstanding ambiguity. While literal misunderstanding ambiguity is caused by semantic ambiguity, intention misunderstanding ambiguity is the result of pragmatic inference.

In addition, some scholars begin to pay attention to the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity. They believe that the intended and careful use of pragmatic ambiguity can engender the following positive functions: 1) make the discourse become more interesting; 2) make the utterance become more attractive; 3) adjust conflicting competing goals; 4) for the sake of politeness. (Xiang Chengdong & Yang Jianding, 1999, p. 35 [10]; Liu Jingxia, 2007: p. 311 [11]; Wu Ligu, 2014: p. 139 [4])

In order to make better use of the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity, this paper aims to use the theory of adaptation which was put forward by Jef Verschueren, Secretary General of the Belgian Society of international pragmatics, to analyse the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity from a new perspective and to look further into pragmatic ambiguity. At the end of this paper, it will be concluded that the positive function of pragmatic ambiguity is the result of the speaker's language choice in the process of language use and his adaptation to the physical world, social world and psychological world. Speaker's choice of language proves that language use is a dynamic process. In this process, language users choose language according to strategy. Meanwhile, they try to adapt to contextual variables and linguistic structures.

2. The Theory of Adaptation

Originally, Adaptation is a concept in Evolution Theory. It was introduced into pragmatics as a new perspective, and then the theory of adaptation emerged. It is a linguistic theory founded by Jef Verschueren, a famous Belgian linguist and Secretary General of the International Pragmatic Society. Compared with other pragmatists who regard pragmatics as one branch of linguistics just like phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics, Verschueren holds a different view of point. Verschueren argues that pragmatics is a comprehensive observation of linguistic phenomena from the perspectives of cognition, society and culture.

Also he believes that pragmatics can be used as a method to study language use, which fully considers the complexity of cognitive, cultural and social functions of language.

In his book *Understanding Pragmatics*, Verschueren puts forward that “using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices, consciously or unconsciously, for language-internal and/or language-external reasons” (2000, p. 55) [12]. He defines language use as an adaptable and negotiable making of linguistic choices, both in interpretation and in production. According to Verschueren, the process of using language is a process in which a language user chooses language continuously at different levels of consciousness based on internal and external reasons, including the choice of language form and language strategy. The reason why language users can make all kinds of appropriate choices in the process of using language is that language has three features—namely variability, negotiability and adaptability. The variability of language means that language has the range of possibilities for choice. The negotiability means that language choice is made on the basis of highly flexible principles and strategies, rather than in a mechanical way or in accordance with strict rules or fixed form-function relationship. The adaptability means that people can make negotiated language choices and flexible adaptations according to various possibilities, so as to meet the needs of communication. These three characteristics of language are closely related to each other, which constitute the basic elements of language use. (Verschueren, 2000 p. 69) [12]

The theory of adaptation also proposes four angles of investigation to the pragmatic descriptions and explanations, namely, contextual correlates of adaptability, structural objects of adaptability, dynamics of adaptability and salience of adaptability process. Contextual correlates of adaptability include any ingredient of the communicative context with which linguistic choices are interadaptable. Structural objects of adaptability include structures at any layer or level of organization as well as principles of structuring. The dynamics of adaptability refers to the unfolding of adaptive processes in interaction. The salience of adaptation processes means the status of those processes in relation to the cognitive apparatus.

Moreover, Verschueren put forward the concept—context. With this concept, the question that what are language or linguistic choices interadaptable with can be solved much easier. Adaptation theory proposed that when using language to convey meaning, one must make the language choice conform to the context. According to Verschueren, “contextual relational adaptation refers to the choice of language in the process of language use and the adaptation of communicative context”. Verschueren believes that context includes communicative context and linguistic context. Language context includes contextual cohesion, contextuality and sequencing. Communicative context includes language users, mental world, social world and physical world. The speaker and hearer are the most important elements of the whole context. The simultaneous presence of the utterer and the interpreter provides a necessary condition for the activation of contextual rela-

tions. Mental world, social world and physical world influence the choice of language and communication form, including the choice of using written language or oral language. The speaker and the hearer make choices respectively and their respective choice-making activated the different aspects of the physical, social, and mental reality. What's more, different aspects of the physical world, the social world and the mental world can only be activated by the speaker and hearer in their respective choice activities. In this way, the action of choosing language becomes part of language use, which in turn becomes part of the composition that is suitable for choice. The mental world includes many emotional factors, such as the emotion, personality and intention of the speaker and the hearer. The social world refers to the principles and norms of the social environment and occasions that affect the behavior of communicators. The most important factors in the physical world are time and space.

3. Interpretation of English Pragmatic Ambiguity Based on Adaptation Theory

3.1. Linguistic Elements Adaptation to the Physical World

According to Verschueren (2000) [12], the physical world mainly includes the indicative relationship between time and space. In terms of time, it includes event time, speaking time and reference time. Spatial indication, that is, location indication relationship, can be divided into two types: one is absolute spatial relationship, such as latitude of East, West, North and South. The other is relative spatial relationship of reference objects. In addition, physical world also includes body gesture, appearance image, physiological characteristics, etc. In many situations, speaker's choice of language is largely influenced by the position or time of the two parties in the physical world. Following are some examples:

Example 1

On Monday, a student couldn't finish his paper on time and he said to his teacher, "I'm afraid I can't finish my paper on time. I was ill last week. May I hand it in next Thursday?"

Teacher: "What do you mean by saying you can't finish it on time? The deadline is next Friday."

In this conversation, the phrase "next Thursday" is a relative notion instead of an absolute value in connection with language. As a result, this sentence has two meanings. In the student's view, "next Thursday" refers to the Thursday in ten days. But, the teacher chooses to interpret "next Thursday" as the Thursday in three days. Then why does the teacher choose to understand the time in this way? Because the teacher definitely knows that the deadline of handing in the paper is this Friday. Therefore, the teacher adapts to this deadline and then his adaptation makes him choose to interpret "next Thursday" as this Friday. Besides, under such understanding the teacher skillfully uses pragmatic ambiguity to euphemistically refuse the student's request.

Example 2

Following is a conversation taking place during American presidential election.

- Where is Washington?
- He's dead.
- I mean, the capital of the United States.
- They loaded it all to Europe.
- Now do you promise to support the constitution?
- Me? How can I? I've got a wife and five children to support.

This conversation uses a series of pragmatic ambiguity. Washington can refer to the first president of the United States and also can refer to the capital of the United States. The word "capital" has two meanings: the most important city of a country or a large amount of money. The word "support" also has two meanings: to help somebody by showing agreement with him or to provide everything necessary so that someone can live. The communicator employs so many pragmatic ambiguities because he adapts to the current situation. It is on the presidential election that the communicator satirizes the American politics. Meanwhile, his answers add a sense of humor to the conversation.

3.2. Linguistic Elements Adaptation to the Social World

Social world includes the social occasion, social environment and the principles and norms to regulate the speech acts of communicators. The communicators here are not abstract and idealized language users. Their speech acts are restricted by social and cultural norms. Culture has always been the most important elements that can reflect the relationship between social world and language choice. There are more or less cultural differences among people from different countries or even different provinces. And different cultural backgrounds lead to different ways of thinking and expression for the same thing. Besides, social world also includes social class, race, nationality, language group, religion, age, education level, occupation, kinship, gender, etc. It is common that language users use ambiguity to protect themselves or to communicate with others better. (Wang Jingyue, 2011, pp. 69-71) [13] Here are some examples.

Example 3

There is a hotel named "Jury". This hotel puts up a poster saying: It'll be a crime to stay anywhere else.

In this example, the word "Jury" can be understood not only as a hotel but also the actual jury. Conventionally only "Jury" can sentence whether someone is criminal or not. Here the hotel proprietor imitates the judge's tone to catch customers' attention and successfully activates customers' conventional cultural background. Such a poster will arouse customers' interest and leave a deep impression on their minds, then promoting the business of the hotel.

Example 4

Following is a conversation taking place in a hotel.

"This is a white hotel." the owner said.

The black customer looked around and said, "It isn't white, such a color needs a great deal of cleaning." "But I don't mind".

Here the owner and the black customer have different interpretations of the sentence "This is a white hotel." The owner is a white and he has discrimination against the black customer. By saying this sentence the hotel owner wants to warn the black not to stay at this hotel. But the black customer wisely and deliberately misunderstood this sentence. The black interprets the phrase "white house" as the environment of the hotel being white. So he said "It isn't white." Meanwhile, he also complains about the hotel's dirty environment and successfully puts himself in an advantageous or favourable position. Why do they have different understandings of the same sentence? Because the white owner and the black customer have different ethnic backgrounds. Both of their choices of language are influenced by their own ethnic backgrounds. The white owner chooses to refuse the black's coming because his ethnic background makes him discriminate the black. The black certainly realizes the discrimination and his ethnic awareness encourages him to protect his right and to criticize the white owner.

Example 5

A man sits down at a table in a restaurant and asks: "Do you serve crabs here?"

The waiter says, "Sure, sit down. We serve everything."

In this example, the customer and the waiter differently understand the word "serve". The customer considers the meaning of "serve" as "give customers crabs". But the waiter thinks "serve" should be interpreted as "to help crabs or sell them something in a shop". These two people have different understandings because in the restaurant customer and waiter have different status. The customer is the one who receives help but the waiter is the one who gives help to customers. Therefore, the customer takes it for granted that the waiter should provide him with crabs. However, influenced by his position, the waiter regards the crabs as the thing he needs to give help to. Consequently, both of them choose language according to their own status and adapt to their own social world.

Example 6

Here is an example taken from Ernest Hemingway's short novel *A Day's Wait*. The child caught a cold. The doctor said he had a fever of 102 Fahrenheit. But the child didn't know the difference between centigrade and Fahrenheit. He thought he was going to die. Then they have a conversation like below.

Father: Your temperature is all right. It's nothing to worry about.

Son: I don't worry, but I can't keep from thinking.

Father: Don't think. Just take it easy.

Son: I'm taking it easy.

In this example, father and son have different understandings of the temperature. Father has the knowledge that Fahrenheit is different from centigrade. But the child is lacking in such knowledge. So they interpret the word "it" differently. Father's interpretation of the word "it" is that the fever is not serious. But the

child understands “it” as the coming death. Through this pragmatic ambiguity, we can see the child’s courage and his self-control. This pragmatic ambiguity is caused by the different knowledge background of father and son.

3.3. Linguistic Elements Adaptation to the Mental World

According to Verschueren, the mental world includes cognitive and emotional factors such as personality, emotion, desire and intention of both sides of communication. The process of the speaker’s choice of language is exactly a dynamic process that adapts to the mental world of communicators. Here are some examples.

Example 7

A Private Conversation

Last week I went to the theatre. I had a very good seat. The play was very interesting. I did not enjoy it. A young man and a young woman were sitting behind me. They were talking loudly. I got very angry. I could not hear the actors. I turned round. I looked at the man and the woman angrily. They did not pay any attention. In the end, I could not bear it. I turned round again. “I can’t hear a word!” I said angrily. “It’s none of your business,” the young man said rudely. “This is a private conversation!”

In this conversation, “I can’t hear a word!” has two meanings. The first is what “I” really want to say: I can’t hear the actors and hope the couple can stop talking. The second is what the young man chooses to understand: what “I” can’t hear is the word of the conversation between him and the young woman instead of the word in the play. Under such understanding, he says “This is a private conversation.” To some extent, the young man chooses to interpret this sentence as the second version because he has the desire that their conversation can be continued and says for themselves. Here his desire is part of his mental world. In other words, it is his adaptation to his mental world that makes the young man choose the second version of understanding. In this example, the young man takes pragmatic ambiguity as a strategy. He makes full use of ambiguity to avoid his responsibility.

Example 8

DARWIN IS RIGHT—INSIDE.

In this sentence, the word “right” can be either an adjective or an adverb. When the word “right” is an adjective, it means “correct”. Then the meaning of this sentence is that the shop owner supports Darwinism and modernism. When the word “right” is an adverb, it means “exactly” or “directly”. Under this circumstance, the meaning of this sentence is that the shop owner whose name is Darwin is exactly inside. We all know this sentence was put on the shop when the conflict between fundamentalism and modernism became much sharper. The shop owner wanted to show his support to modernism but he also wanted to protect himself from trouble. Because of such intention, he chooses to use this sentence. Through this example, we can clearly see that the shop owner’s utterance interadapt to his mental world. To a great degree, the interplay between

linguistic choices and the mental states of the language user cannot be ignored.

Example 9

A customer bought a dress in the mall and found that the quality of the dress was not good. It seemed that there was some old oil stains on the dress. So she took the dress back to the shop.

Customer: "Miss, I want to return the dress.

Shop assistant: "what's wrong?"

Customer: "Though I have washed it, it still looks like as if it were not washed."

Shop assistant: "That's great. So why do you want to return it? It is as good as unwashed. That proves its good quality. It is so durable!"

Here, customer and shop assistant have two entirely different understanding of the sentence "Though I have washed it, it still looks like as if it were not washed." The customer means the dress is as dirty as before. She complains about the poor quality of the dress. But the shop assistant understands this sentence in the way that the quality of the dress is quite good. The shop assistant uses the pragmatic ambiguity of this sentence on the purpose of shirking responsibility and cheating the customer.

Example 10

A professor tapped on his desk and shouted: "Gentlemen, —order!"

The entire class yelled: "Beer!"

In this example, the word "order" has two meanings: one is "being placed or arranged"; another is "to ask for a service to be provided". The professor's actual intention is to require students to become quiet and get ready for lesson. But the students understand the word "order" like asking for service deliberately. They understand "order" like this because they adapt to their mental world and implicate their reluctance to begin the class. By taking advantage of pragmatics ambiguity, the students add much humor to the conversation, which makes the conversation become light.

Seen through these examples above, communicators choose to use pragmatic ambiguity in order to conform to the physical, social and mental worlds of both sides. However, it should be pointed out that sometimes it is not a single contextual element that can make the communicator choose to use pragmatic ambiguity. These elements always work together. But in different situations and times, the dominant role of various contextual elements is different. Moreover, these contextual elements are not always agreed before communication. Instead, they are generated dynamically by both parties in the process of choosing languages. Also, these contextual elements develop and change as communications are developed.

4. The Functions and Mechanisms of Pragmatic Ambiguity

4.1. The Cognitive Functions of Pragmatic Ambiguity

From these examples above, it is easy to see that pragmatic ambiguity, instead of

leading to misunderstanding and having negative effects, has some special positive effects during the process of communication.

As an important carrier of communication, language exists naturally and is widely exploited by language users. Generally speaking, when using language, people will consciously take advantage of good aspects to benefit themselves. Based on this cognitive function, when pragmatic ambiguity occurs, people tend to exploit the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity. That is to say, pragmatic ambiguity is often used as a creative pragmatic strategy in advertising, rhetoric and interpersonal communication.

4.1.1. Advertising Language Caused by Pragmatic Ambiguity Based on the Cognitive Mechanism

Advertisement usually needs to be concise. What's more, advertisement should attract customers at their first glance. Advertisers often activate the customer's first cognitive context by using pragmatic ambiguity, and then activate another cognitive context through the content of advertising language. By acting in this way, people can quickly understand the implied meaning of advertising.

Here is an advertisement for London tube:

Example 11

Less bread. No jam.

In this advertisement, it is obvious that the advertiser absolutely knows what customers need so he uses words which are familiar to customers to activate their first cognitive context. The advertiser realizes that in the modern world people believe less fat and more vegetables are good for our health. Therefore, the advertiser is sure that this expression will arouse customers' interests and will successfully activate customers' first cognitive context. In such a cognitive context, this advertisement has complex meanings simultaneously. The explicit one is that we offer you less bread and no jam because we know you don't like it. Actually, this advertisement also activate customers' another cognitive context: the relationship between bread and money; and the relationship between jam and crowded traffic. Thus, in this context bread indicates money and jam means traffic jam. When such cognitive context is activated, this advertisement has an implicit meaning—if you travel by London Tube, you will spend less money and will never suffer from traffic jams.

4.1.2. Humor Caused by Pragmatic Ambiguity Based on the Cognitive Mechanism

Example 10 in the above has some kind of humor. What causes such an effect? First of all, the word "order" the teacher said reminded the students to be quiet. Moreover, the word "order" also activates another cognitive context of students, that is, ordering in pubs. Of course, at this time, students should not take the classroom as a pub and order beers. However, students' approach is humorous. This can be very effective to alleviate the teacher's mood.

Here is another example.

Example 12

A lady goes to a shop to buy a pair of leather shoes. She tries on several pairs in the shop so that she can find the one she likes most. At that time, the shopkeeper says “Buy it. It is the genuine leather.” (Song Dongmei, 2010, pp. 52-55) [14]

After his saying, all the customers in the shop are laughing. Why are they laughing? It is the shopkeeper’s use of cognitive mechanism of pragmatic ambiguity that has created a sense of humor. Firstly, the shopkeeper wants to tell the lady that his shoes are made of genuine leather. Meanwhile, “genuine leather” also activates customers’ another cognitive context of boosting. Though at this moment the shopkeeper is definitely not boosting, his ambiguous words are full of humor.

4.1.3. Self-Protection Caused by Pragmatic Ambiguity Based on the Cognitive Mechanism

Example 7 takes pragmatic ambiguity as a strategy to protect the speaker. At the time when conflicts between modernism and fundamentalism become worse and worse, the situation was very dangerous for the modernists. The shop owner wants to express his support for modernists but also fear to be attacked. Thus, he chooses to use the ambiguous word “right”. Although this ambiguous sentence does not directly indicate the shop owner’s point of view, it activates people’s cognitive context and enables people to infer the meaning of this ambiguity successfully. As a result, this ambiguity helps the shop owner to both show his position and protect him from any danger.

4.2. The Working Mechanisms of Pragmatic Ambiguity

Cognitive linguists believe that conception comes from physical and mental experience in the real world, and is understood only by the way of such experience. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 103) [15] From a cognitive point of view, language is undoubtedly the projected result of all kinds of relationships in the objective world through people’s cognition. Language competence is not an autonomous signs independent of other cognitive abilities, but an integral part of people’s cognition. (He Ziran, 2006, pp. 18-36) [16] Pragmatic ambiguity, as a unique linguistic phenomenon, is based on context and pays full attention to the speaker’s expression and the speaker’s understanding. Because of the speaker’s unintentional or intentional use of language in context, the language he uses causes the hearer to have different understandings. What’s more, the language can show more than one kind of locutionary or illocutionary force, which further leads to unintentional ambiguity and intentional ambiguity. The intentional ambiguity refers to the intentional use of ambiguous language in communication in order to achieve a certain effect or achieve a certain communicative purpose.

4.2.1. Context Is the Premise of Pragmatic Ambiguity

Xiang Chengdong believes that context is the cornerstone of ambiguity and plays an extremely important role in the working of pragmatic ambiguity. (2003, pp.

80-82) [17] Context can both eliminate ambiguity and produce ambiguity. It is generally believed that context is determined before the real understanding process. But Xiong Xueliang (1996, pp. 1-7) [18] believes that context “mainly refers to cognitive context, *i.e.* pragmatic knowledge systemized by language users.” He emphasizes that cognitive context includes four pragmatic categories, namely situational knowledge, contextual knowledge, background knowledge, and the collective consciousness shared by members in a social community. Linguists believe that the range of cognitive context is very broad; cognitive context is dynamic and is crucial to discourse interpretation.

We believe that cognitive context is knowledge modules stored in our brains, large or small, which can be mobilized at any time to help us understand the meaning of language. (Song Dongmei, 2017, pp. 79-80) [19] Besides, a person’s cognitive context is a necessary element that enables him to contact with the world constantly. Sometimes cognitive context also can produce contextual assumptions and lay an implicit premise for pragmatic inference. Therefore, language in communication has multiple meanings relative to different cognitive contexts, that is, ambiguity.

There are two main views on the influence of context which affect the working mechanism of pragmatic ambiguity. The first view is that when people understand sentences, they often give only one interpretation to ambiguous sentence. If this interpretation is inconsistent with the meaning of the sentence, people will turn back and offer a new interpretation of the ambiguity. They repeat this process so many times until they understand the sentence correctly. Another view is that when people encounter ambiguous sentence, they often present a variety of interpretations. Then they choose interpretation which is the most appropriate to the context. If this interpretation is consistent with the meaning of the sentence, people will continue to understand the sentence with the right interpretation. If people are aware that the latter context contradicts with the chosen meaning, they will try a reasonable interpretation again. (Xiang Chengdong, 2003, pp. 80-82) [17].

For example, in different context the sentence “It’s cool here” may have different meanings. When hearing this sentence, at first people may understand this sentence as the speaker’s talking about the weather. But when they notice the wide open window, they will find their former understanding is wrong and return to interpret this sentence again and get the correct meaning of the sentence—the speaker wants to ask them to close the window and make the room warm.

Finally, it should be pointed out that when people understand ambiguous sentences, they should first activate some interpretations related to ambiguous words. Then, they may choose in terms of syntax, semantics or in different contexts to find a more appropriate interpretation to achieve the understanding of the sentence. Of course, the activation state of an ambiguous word is also related to the storage form in people’s psychology.

4.2.2. Pragmatic Inference Promotes the Formation of Cognitive Mechanism of Pragmatic Ambiguity

Pragmatic inference is a human cognition process, in which people can realize the essential causes and operation modes of language. The ultimate goal of pragmatic inference is to infer speaker's intention known as implicit conclusion. The value of studying the cognitive mechanism of pragmatic ambiguity lies in such an inference process. Pragmatic inference, in the process of promoting the formation of cognitive mechanism of pragmatic ambiguity, starts from the explicit language, then combines linguistic and non-linguistic cognitive contexts, and gradually infers the speaker's implicit conclusion. During the process of pragmatic inference, we should first activate the contextual assumption between the explicit language of the speaker and the cognitive context of the hearer. Secondly, we should make full use of the contextual assumption constructed by the hearer to provide implicit premise for pragmatic inference and give sufficient evidence to pragmatic ambiguity. Last but not the least, we also should combine the explicit language with implicit premise by which pragmatic inference can be strengthened.

For instance, in a family party the daughter gives her mother an orange. And the mother says "The orange is so delicious." Meanwhile, the mother points to the dad. These two actions activate the daughter's cognitive context that the mother wants her to give an orange to her father. Simultaneously, the daughter will further infer that father may also like eating an orange. With such pragmatic inference, the formation of cognitive mechanism of pragmatic ambiguity is promoted. Finally, the daughter combines mother's explicit language with the pragmatic inference made by herself and then concludes that she should give an orange to her father.

5. Conclusion

To sum up, linguists analyze pragmatic ambiguity from different perspectives. Most of the studies tend to research ambiguity from functional point of view. At first, it is often regarded as a negative phenomenon and its positive functions are often ignored. But gradually, many linguists realize the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity and try to take its advantages to bring about good effects. Yet up to now few linguists have studied pragmatic ambiguity from the adaptation theories. Thus, based on Verschueren's adaptation theory, this thesis takes English as an example to study the positive functions of pragmatic ambiguity. At the beginning, this thesis reviews the studies on pragmatic ambiguity at home and abroad. Then the thesis introduces the theory of adaptation theory and its correlation with the positive function of pragmatic ambiguity. Furthermore, it is concluded that the positive function of pragmatic ambiguity is the result of the speaker's language choice in the process of language use and his adaptation to the physical world, social world and mental world. This proves that language use is a dynamic process. In this process, language users choose language on the basis of strategy and adapt to contextual variables and linguistic structural ele-

ments. In the last chapter, this thesis talks about the functions and mechanisms of pragmatic ambiguity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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