



Available Online at EScience Press

Journal of South Asian Studies

ISSN: 2307-4000 (Online), 2308-7846 (Print)

<https://esciencepress.net/journals/JSAS>

Strategies of Pragmatic Distance Employed in English Writing by Chinese College Students

Junqiang Zhao*School of Foreign Languages, Lanzhou University of Technology, 730050. Lanzhou, Gansu, China.***Corresponding Author Email ID: 1877870344@qq.com*

ABSTRACT

The situation of English writing by Chinese college students is a matter difficult to handle, with some being good and some bad. The flexible processing of pragmatic distance in English writings between authors and readers to ensure effective pragmatic communication deserves too much thought. The appropriate use of strategies of pragmatic distance employed in English writings has a direct impact on writing performance. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze how to use relevance theory to interpret strategies of pragmatic distance employed in English writings, and to find out whether there is a certain relationship between the strategic use of pragmatic distance and gender, thus providing a reference for the research to improve English writing proficiency of Chinese college students.

Keywords: English writing, pragmatic distance, gender difference.

INTRODUCTION

Pragmatic distance is a kind of psychological distance between the communicator and the object of communication or the referential world of utterance in the process of verbal communication. It refers to the degree of closeness or alienation in the relationship between the two sides of the communication perceived and confirmed in the specific communication environment. Communicators can maintain or change the existing pragmatic distance by certain linguistic means (Jianhua, 2001) ^[1]. Kasper and Blum-Kulka (1993) ^[2] believes that pragmatic distance regulates the relationship between the two speakers, which is very important in interpersonal communication. Yule (2000) ^[3] points out that the speaker can choose direct speeches, indirect speeches or some mixed forms to express different pragmatic distances, so as to obtain certain communicative effects. Like the choices in spatial deixis, people can choose tenses skillfully in order to narrow or enlarge the time distance of events, thus producing some pragmatic distance effect.

In pragmatics, pragmatic distance is often associated with politeness. Leech's politeness principle mainly

defines language politeness from semantics and its expression means (Leech, 1983) ^[4]; Brown & Levinson's "Face Theory" introduces social factors in defining language politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) ^[5]. Most of the previous studies on politeness have investigated the relationship between politeness and social distance from the static social distance, but not from the dynamic pragmatic distance.

Most of the studies on pragmatic distance in China are from the perspective of politeness principle. Jianhua (2000) ^{a)}, Jinyan (2002) ^[7] and Hongmei (2014) ^[8] study discourse politeness and pragmatic distance, politeness in pragmatic distance principle and social pragmatic distance, discourse politeness and politeness principle in translation respectively. From other perspectives, Xueping (2005) ^[9] discusses the relationship between adaptation theory and pragmatic distance; Chunhong (2005) ^[10] studies the relationship between address terms and pragmatic distance; Ling (2005) ^[11] analyzes pragmatic distance and discourse choice; Yang (2010) ^[12] analyzes the use and pragmatic distance of English and Chinese plural first person deixis; Jiafu (2011) ^[13]

studies the cross-cultural and pragmatic distance of address pronouns; Huang Qian (2011) ^[14] investigates the relationship between address pronouns and pragmatic distance from the perspective of context adaptation and pragmatic distance in the analysis of appellation terms in the novel *An Epic of a Woman*, and Xiaobing (2013) ^[15] analyzes the experience of pragmatic distance regulation in library circulation service windows.

In sum, there are few tentative studies on pragmatic distance in English writing, and there are few comparative studies on gender differences in pragmatic distance strategies in English writing specifically. In English writing, when confronted with different discourse types, the author uses various lexical and syntactic means to adjust pragmatic distances and communicate with readers. If the author reasonably grasps the pragmatic distance, the credibility and affinity of writing can be increased, thus ensuring the effective communication between the author and the reader.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Human beings always follow the principle of relevance in their perception of things, that is, "any explicit communicative activity means that the activity has the best relevance" (Zhaoxiong,2000), ^[16]. As far as verbal communication is concerned, what both sides of the communication express must be related to the whole topic and to what the other side has said previously; people understand the speaker's intention according to the interrelated information between the utterances.

From the perspective of relevance theory, ostensive inferential behavior shows that the communication process is dynamic. It is a process in which new information constantly affirms, strengthens or negates old information, and it is a process in which new hypothesis and old hypothesis interact. The speaker's ostensive process is a process of making choices based on the judgment of the hearer's cognitive ability and abided by the principle of relevance, with the hearer's reasoning process being the process of selecting the best relevance hypothesis among various pragmatic hypotheses.

As a new hot spot in pragmatics, relevance theory is being applied in many fields by more and more scholars. However, few researchers use it to explain and study the use of pragmatic distance strategies in English writing. Based on the framework of relevance theory proposed

by D. Sperber and D. Wilson (1995) ^[17], this paper analyzes how to use pragmatic distance strategies in English writing to achieve the optimal relevance. This paper seeks a theoretical basis for the use of pragmatic distance strategies to further prove that the use of pragmatic distance strategies can be based on the principle of relevance theory. In short, relevance theory can explain the use of pragmatic strategies.

According to relevance theory, in the process of reading and writing, if readers can find the best relevance between intuitive information and non-intuitive information and understand different pragmatic distance strategies, their reading efficiency will be improved. The purpose of this paper is to study how the author changes the pragmatic distance to communicate with the readers, and the scope of the study is to specify how the author chooses the appropriate discourse strategies to regulate the pragmatic distance, so as to establish an optimal distance between the reader and the author to achieve the best relevance.

RESEARCH PROCESS

Corpus collection

In order to avoid the interference factors in the research, 72 Chinese college students of the same grade, the same major and the same class were asked to complete an English composition on the same topic within a given time. 60 pieces of compositions, 30 by males and 30 by females, were randomly sorted out as the research corpus.

Research questions

Pragmatic distance strategies and gender differences in English writing by Chinese college students are to be addressed. Pragmatic distance strategies can be classified and refined from lexical and syntactic aspects, and their frequency of use can be counted respectively. With specific examples, this paper describes and analyzes the use of pragmatic distance strategies in English writing.

How does relevance theory explain the use of pragmatic distance strategies? How can the dynamic communicative thinking mode of relevance theory, ostensive inference, be embodied in the choosing and handling of pragmatic distance strategies to prove the extensiveness and explanatory power of relevance theory?

Research method

Because of the complexity of language expression and

the diversity of factors restricting interpersonal relationship, as well as the complexity of specific speech strategies regulating a proper pragmatic distance, a pragmatic distance as compared with a spatial distance cannot be quantified. However, according to the degree of intimacy or alienation of interpersonal relationship, the pragmatic distance can be duly described. On the one hand, this study is to describe and analyze discourse examples reflecting different pragmatic distances in English writing, and on the other hand, software data are used to analyze pragmatic distance strategies in the layers of vocabulary and syntax.

The research method of this paper is the combination of theoretical elaboration and example interpretation analysis, quantitative statistics and qualitative analysis. In the framework of relevance theory, this paper uses Corpustool software to code and count the vocabulary

and syntax factors that affect the use of pragmatic distance strategies, such as personal deixis, abbreviations, ellipsis and imperative sentences, and analyzes gender differences in the use of pragmatic distance strategies in English writing for an optimal relevance.

The corpus can be statistically analyzed from both lexical and syntactic perspectives. In terms of vocabulary, we can count personal deixis, spatial deixis, time deixis, abbreviations, modal auxiliary verbs and hedges; in syntax, we can count the use of ellipsis, imperative sentences, direct quotations and indirect quotations in English writing by Chinese college students. The following two tables (Table 1-2) can briefly illustrate the relationship between pragmatic distance and lexical and syntactic expansion respectively.

Table 1. Interactive Relationship between Pragmatic Distance and Vocabulary.

pragmatic distance	Extending pragmatic distance	Shortening pragmatic distance
lexical items		
Personal deixis	you, their, Tom’s, I, he	we, our, us
Spatial deixis	up, far, there	next to, besides, here
Time deixis	at that time, then	the moment, right now
Abbreviations	I have, and so on	I’ve, etc.
Modal auxiliary	must, should	shall, ought to, would, need
Linguistic hedges	very, good	considerably, superior

Source: The table is made by the author.

As shown in Table 1, the macro interaction between pragmatic distance and lexical use can be described and analyzed in a combination with contexts and moods. In English writing, the plural “we” means the singular “I”, that is, the first-person plural replacing the first person singular or the first-person plural replacing the second person “you”. It can not only refer to both the author and the reader, but also refer to the author or the reader only. The pragmatic distance will be narrowed or expanded. The use of abbreviations is only used in informal occasions, that is, this kind of short expression can only be used between friends and in intimate relationships. However, informal abbreviations are not recommended in formal English writing, and the use of abbreviations in English writing is intended to narrow

the pragmatic distance, indicating that the speaker and the hearer are close, so that the author can be in a harmonious and relaxing atmosphere in communicating with readers. “Must, should” should not be rampant in English writing, otherwise these words will destroy the harmonious communication mood between the author and the reader. Proper use of hedges can shorten the pragmatic distance, despite their side effects. If hedges not used properly, communication may be interrupted. What is the specific degree by referring to “very” or “good” in English writing? How can “good” be regarded as being good? Such over generalized, empty and boring words can only damage the quality of writing.

Table 2. Interactive Relationship between Pragmatic Distance and Syntax.

syntactic items	pragmatic distance	
	Extending pragmatic distance	Shortening pragmatic distance
Ellipsis	He has gone, but no one knows where (he has gone).	I consider him (to be) lazy.
Imperative sentence	Parents with children go the front!	Let us be here by 10 o'clock.
Direct speech	"Open the window," the teacher said to the boy.	He asked me, "How can I get here?"
Indirect speech	The teacher told the boy to open the window.	He asked me how he could get there.

Source: The table is made by the author.

In terms of syntax, ellipsis is often used in friends' talking, indicating that people involved are friends, and some words are self-evident. Table 2 illustrates some sentence patterns that extend and shorten the pragmatic distance. In English writing, the ellipsis should be used carefully, and the expression and reference should be clear as far as possible. However, the proper use of imperative sentences, such as "let us be here by 10 o'clock." will not alienate the pragmatic distance but will shorten the pragmatic distance. Direct speeches can shorten the time distance of actual existence, produce vivid narrative effect and give people the feeling of being

in the scene; but if the imperative sentence "open the window!" is used in the specific context of direct speeches, the pragmatic distance is alienated.

Data analysis

After statistics, the relevant series of data are obtained. Table 3 gives an overall description of text complexity, lexical density and personal reference in male and female students' writing. The data in the table show that there is no significant difference between the two genders in this respect. They all use the first and third person more often, and the female students use the personal references slightly more than the males.

Table 3. Writing Information by Male and Female Students.

Item		two genders	males	females
Text Complexity	Av. Word Length	4.53	4.57	4.49
	Av. Segment Length	154.53	156.40	152.65
Lexical Density	Lexemes per segment	76.72	78.30	75.15
	Lexemes % of text	49.65%	50.06%	49.23%
Reference Density	1p reference	2.378%	2.21%	2.55%
	2p reference	0.227%	0.22%	0.23%
	3p reference	3.511%	3.45%	3.57%

Source: The table is made by the author.

In Table 4, it is concluded that pragmatic distance strategies are used for 541 times in 60 pieces of writing, while syntactic strategies are less used, mainly ellipsis

being used to express different pragmatic distances; in terms of vocabulary strategies, personal deixis and hedges are most used, while time deixis is the least.

Table 4. Pragmatic Strategies Embodied in Writing (541 totally).

lexical	details	personal deixis	spatial deixis	time deixis	abbreviations	modal auxiliary	hedges
92.2%	percentage	31.7%	11.0%	4.6%	8.6%	19.6%	24.4%
499	frequency	158	55	23	43	98	122
syntactic	details	ellipsis	imperative sentence	direct speech	indirect speech		
7.8%	percentage	92.9%	2.4%	0.0%	4.8%		
42	frequency	39	1	0	2		

Source: The table is made by the author.

Written language communication is a process of authors' ideas and readers' inferences. In the various ways of authors' conveying ideas, there are differences in the use of pragmatic distance strategies between male and female authors. Table 5 and Table 6 show detailed

information on the use of vocabulary and syntactic strategies by both genders, respectively. In English writing, the readers' cognitive level can be considered so as to adopt different pragmatic distance strategies to convey and express ideas.

Table 5. Lexical Pragmatic Strategies by Two Genders.

Lexical items		personal deixis	spatial deixis	time deixis	abbreviations	modal auxiliary	hedges	sum
males	percentage	28.5%	12.1%	3.8%	9.2%	25.1%	21.3%	100%
	frequency	68	29	9	22	60	51	239
females	percentage	34.6%	10.0%	5.4%	8.1%	14.6%	27.3%	100%
	frequency	90	26	14	21	38	71	260

Source: The table is made by the author.

It can be seen from Table 5 those female students use more lexical pragmatic strategies than boys. Both genders use personal deixis most and time deixis least to

regulate pragmatic distances. It is worth mentioning that boys use more modal verbs than girls, and there is a significant difference between them.

Table 6. Syntactic Pragmatic Strategies by Two Genders.

Syntactic items		ellipsis	imperative sentence	direct speech	indirect speech	sum
males	percentage	88.5%	3.8%	0.0%	7.7%	100%
	frequency	23	1	0	2	26
females	percentage	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
	frequency	16	0	0	0	16

Source: The table is made by the author.

In terms of syntax, Table 6 shows that it is difficult for both genders to use syntactic strategies to regulate pragmatic distances and effectively express their ideas. Obviously, it is beyond the reach of authors to directly quote the sonorous and powerful words and phrases in writing. Boys' syntactic thinking is more divergent, and more syntactic strategies are used to adjust pragmatic distance, while girls only use ellipsis.

Example analysis

This paper analyzes the use and effect of pragmatic strategies based on the specific examples in students' writing. There are obvious grammatical errors in these two sentences, but the basic meaning can be understood.

Example 1: "In my opinion, we should not on fare evasion, if you think the charge is not rational, you can response to higher level. So, we should fare on what we get."

Example 2: "In my opinion all the people should combat unhealthy phenomenon. We should supervise each other, and related branch should make some rules. Especially we need to pay more attention to ourselves' character building and set up correct values."

"In my opinion" limits the credibility of the proposition.

The author only expresses his or her views on behalf of the individual. The author's fuzzy estimation avoids misleading readers and shortens the pragmatic distance. The use of "should", this modal verb, is too frequent, and the information imposed on readers by the author goes in his or her own way, and the imperative mood will only widen the pragmatic distance. In example 2, "should" is replaced with "need to" at the end of the sentence, which makes it easier for readers to accept and recognize the assertion. In addition, the repeated use of "we" in the two sentences makes the author and the reader being integrated into one, which is full of affinity in shortening the pragmatic distance.

The process of writing is a process in which the author combs and uses the language and the reader thinks and understands it. It is also a process of finding and determining relevance. The writing process is a carrier for the author and the reader to flexibly adjust the pragmatic distance for mutual communication. Writing should not only focus on the understanding of words and sentences, but also focus on the relevance of the whole text, with the subtle pragmatic distance strategies used

and understood between the reader and the author at a more macro level.

CONCLUSION

This study enriches relevance theory and analyzes gender differences in pragmatic distance strategies used in English writing by Chinese college students. Readers can try as little as possible to find out the relevant relationship between language use and cognitive context in writing, so as to improve reading sensitivity, thus the study of pragmatic distance being extended from oral dialogues to written texts, with this study providing a new starting point for the investigation of pragmatic distances reflected in English writing by Chinese college students. Through a comparative analysis of gender differences in pragmatic distance strategies in English writing, qualitative semantic description and quantitative data statistics can help us understand English writing by Chinese college students more comprehensively and accurately.

REFERENCES

- Brown, P. & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Chunhong, Y. (2005). Address forms and pragmatic distance. *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Humanities and social sciences)* (10): 283-285.
- Huang Qian, H. (2011). Analysis of appellation terms in an epic of a woman from the perspective of contextual adaptation and pragmatic distance. PhD Thesis, Henan University of Science and Technology, China.
- Jiafu, Q. (2011). Cross cultural and pragmatic distance of address pronouns. *Journal of Chinese PLA Institute of Foreign Languages* (6): 21-25.
- Jianhua, W. (2002). Pragmatic distance principle of politeness. *Journal of Donghua University* (4): 31-32.
- Jianhua, W. (2001). Discourse politeness and pragmatic distance. *Foreign languages*, (5): 25-31.
- Jinyan, H. (2012). On discourse politeness and pragmatic distance. PhD Thesis, Inner Mongolia University, China.
- Kasper, G., & Blum-Kulka, S. (1993). *Interlanguage Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leech, G. N. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. London and New York: Longman.
- Ling, Y. (2005.) Pragmatic distance and discourse choice, PhD Thesis. Shanxi University, China.
- Sperber, D. & Wilson, D. (1995). *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2nd Ed.
- Qian, H. (2011). Analysis of appellation terms in an epic of a woman from the perspective of contextual adaptation and pragmatic distance. PhD Thesis, Henan University of Science and Technology, China.
- Xiaobing, L. (2013). Experience in regulating pragmatic distance of library circulation service window. *Success education* (6): 178-180.
- Xueping, X. (2005). Adaptation theory and pragmatic distance. *Foreign language and literature* (2): 91-95.
- Yang, L. (2010). The use and pragmatic distance of plural first person deixis in English and Chinese. *Journal of Wuhan University of technology* (8): 78-81.
- Yule, G. (2000). *Pragmatics*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Zhaoxiang, H. (2000). *A new introduction to pragmatics*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

Publisher's note: EScience Press remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third-party material in this article are included in the article's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

© The Author(s) 2021.

