Advice for East Asian Countries' English Teaching under the Perspective of Lexical Pragmatics— Taking Modern Family as examples

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Abstract. Though there were sufficient lexical analyses and Pragmatics analyses, researches based on Lexical pragmatics are not enough as it involves the combination of written meaning of text and extended meaning based on context in particular situations. Subsequently, more teaching methods are required for ESL in East Asian countries who aims at communication with native English speakers in cultures where English is the first language. This paper focused on the lexical pragmatics analysis of an episode of Modern Family, a popular American sitcom in which characters' lines were used to create humor successfully. Aspects in lexical pragmatics including narrowing, broadening and figurative speeches such as metaphor and puns are used for research in this paper. In addition, teaching methods, such as adding English conversation practice and corresponding criteria were proposed for high level ESL in East Asian countries. This paper could help broaden creative mind for English teachers for second language learners to improve teaching quality.

Keywords: Lexical pragmatics; Teaching method; Conversation analyses.

1. Introduction

Currently, the communication between countries had been frequent with increase in aspects such as business communication, travels, and immigration. The learning of English is still attached great importance to for east Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Japan. The study of Lexical meaning of words and phrases are no longer enough for the ESL aiming for higher level, especially when communicating with native English speakers. The context, idioms, as well as other information apart from speech should be added in to better understand the conversation. In the paper, an episode of Modern Family, which was a successful sitcom, was taken to make analyses in lexical pragmatics. Four effective scenes were taken and the lines were analyzed in three sections of narrowing, broadening, and other figurative speeches including puns and metaphor. It was found that though information was fully offered in the speeches, there were still circumstances people understand the lexicon in the different way from the speaker because of asymmetric information and even sudden information the speaker did not expect. Recommendations were offered based on the analysis for improving the teaching in east Asian English classes. It was recommended that the class should be more practical with conversation. Besides, Audio and video clips were suggested as tools to help understanding.

2. Case Analyses

Lexical pragmatics has been intensively found in the 18th episode of Season 5 in Modern Family. In the following part, the broadening, narrowing, and metaphor were separately analyzed to discuss how Modern Family used lexical pragmatics to create humorous scenes.

In episode 18, there were story lines following three character- groups of Mitchell, Cameron, and Langham (M&G&L), Phil and the butler Higgins (P&H), and Jay and Burt (J&B). The background was about the whole family was traveling to Las Vegas for an invitation Jay received to a hotel as excelsior level guests. The first line of M&C&L was about the couple of Mitchell and Cameron ran into the couple of Langham, who was Mitchell's ex-boyfriend, with his husband Tim. While Mitchell

and Cameron were having fun separately without telling each other, Mitchell tried to make peace with Langham, however, the message was taken wrong by Langham as an invitation to restart their relationship especially after the conversation with Higgins, the hotel butler for Jay's family. The second story line was about Phil was preparing for the magic show so that he paid less attention to Claire, his wife, and he was sorry for that so he tried to make compensation taking the advice of Higgins. Butler Higgins had no idea who Claire and the one Mitchell was expecting were, however, he offered Phil to make compensation to his partner by a bath the hotel specially offered. The third story line was about Jay trying to ask the hotel's owner Burt for a promotion in his customer card level. He tried to make Burt like his life style to convince him. However, strange things happened as he was showing the gifts prepared for Burt. As a result, there were plenty examples of messages understood in different ways by the participants in the conversation which seemed went smooth.

2.1. Scene 1

This scene was about Mitchell and Cameron ran into Langham and Tim, who were going to get married and threw a party that weekend they met. Mitchell used to have a relationship with Langham and it ended up terribly. The new couple invited Mitchell and Cameron to the party in this scene.

2.1.1 Narrowing

The following example was about Mitchell defending himself for leaving Langham after noticing him with an e-mail.

...and it was still a blurry line
as to what was appropriate and...

In this example, the phrase 'blurry line' refers to the choice of an appropriate way of ending a relationship. The word blurry has three meanings of 1) not clear to see 2) not clear to remember 3) not clear to definite, among which the third meaning was taken to articulate the blurry boundary of what is appropriate[1-6]. Accompanied with the word 'line', which was narrowed to the meaning of imaginary mark that people generally agree with, the phrase 'blurry line' helped to form Mitchell's self-defense of there was no rule saying e-mail was not allowed to be used to end up a romantic relationship.

2.1.2 Broadening

In the scene of the first example, Langham was making a complaint of Mitchell ended their relationship improperly by e-mail.

Example:

It's almost like you never <u>dumped</u> me in an e-mail
the morning after I told you that I loved you.

The word dump means 1) put down something and 2) get rid of something unwanted in lexical dictionary. The meaning has been broadened from getting rid of something to getting rid of someone, which refers to the termination announcement of Mitchell with his relationship with Langham in this text.

The following line was from Tim, Langham's fiance, who was telling Mitchell and Cameron about the full itinerary that weekend.

Example:

Well, we have a pretty packed weekend.

The word 'packed' has the meaning of 1) full of people and 2) full of physical things such as 'The room is packed with tables and chairs'. It cannot be fully understood if the second meaning is simply used. The word 'packed' was broadened to the meaning of 'full of abstract things' which referred to all the errands the couple would run in the weekend to accomplish their wedding ceremony. The meaning was processed, given, and taken by both the speaker and the listeners in the speech according to the information in the context[3]. The participants were aware of the direction of broadening.

2.1.3 Metaphor & Puns

The first example was lines from Tim, Langham's fiance, who was telling Mitchell and Cameron about the full itinerary that weekend.

Example:

...here's our itinerary.
- Okay. - Come play.
-Oh, yeah. - Fun. Bye.
- You guys, congratulations.
- Thank you. Oh, my gosh, an actual gay agenda.

The phrase 'gay agenda' in the one hand referred to the itinerary of the weekend given by the Langham couple, which took the synonymous substitution of the word 'agenda'. Besides, Cameron used this phrase to imply the efforts gays do to improve their social status to express his excitement about the party in his speech[5]. In this line, the phrase 'gay agenda' has certain meanings which Cameron knew his listener, Mitchell, could understood. As a result, it worked for both of them to notice Cameron's positive attitude about the party by using the phrase. Moreover, it also showed Cameron's wit in talking by associating the itinerary with social issues[7-8].

2.2. Scene 2

This scene was about Mitchell met Langham accidentally while he was gambling and winning out of his own surprise. Mitchell was touched in the joyous atmosphere and tried to make peace with Langham since they ended up hurriedly with their relationship.

2.2.1 Narrowing

This example was a line of Mitchell in the conversation with Longham sharing his new attitude to gambling in Las Vegas.

Example:

Yeah, I guess I figure whatever mischief one might get into in Vegas
kind of remains here within the limits of the city, you know?

In this line, narrowing was used in the word 'limits', which has plenty of meaning of physical boundary, rules, and abstract boundedness, etc. The meaning of geographical boundary was taken in this sentence since the attribute modifier 'of the city' implied the direction for narrowing[4]. Subsequently, according to the context of Mitchell's attitude to gambling in Las Vegas and the common tourism knowledge of Las Vegas as a place of gambling, it was possible for the listener as well as the audience of the TV series to understand Mitchell would like to have fun in the certain trip to the city. It was also implied that Mitchell would not gamble after the trip.

2.2.2 Broadening

The example blow was an extract of Mitchell's lines about him winning in the gambling with excitement while Longham was sitting next to him.

Example:

Oh -- oh, my god!
6-2-3-3, that's -- that's my room number.
Huh. Um, hit me.
Seven!

The phrase 'hit me' was taken wrong by one of the listener Langham. 'Hit me' used by Mitchell here was to make requirement for the croupier in the gambling to deal cards for him as he believed he was going to win the game. However, the phrase also has the meaning of invitation for a visit. Langham mistaken Mitchell's words for the speaker, who he used to have a relationship with, told him the numbers of his game was also his room number. The phrase 'hit me' was then widely related to an invitation by Langham from Mitchell to go to his hotel room and make a visit [7-8].

2.2.3 Metaphor

The following conversation happened when Langham met Mitchell accidentally and found him enjoy gambling.

Example:

-Hey, big spender.

What are you doing?

-Gambling. I'm a gambler now.

He chatted with Mitchell and called him a 'big spender'. Metaphor was used in this line referring Mitchell as a 'big spender'. According to the situation, Langham formed a hoc conception which both Mitchell and Langham could understand as Mitchell was spending a lot in the game to bet on his luck. In Langham's speech, big spender had a positive meaning of saying Mitchell was rich which was Langham's complimentary to start the conversation. The meaning was taken successfully by the listener Mitchell[2], and he replied Langham by saying he was a gambler to approve Langham's metaphor.

The same example of 2.2.1 also used metaphor analyzed in lexical pragmatics aspect.

Example:

Yeah, I guess I figure whatever mischief one might get into in Vegas
kind of remains here within the limits of the city, you know?

The word mischief has the meaning of 1) child's slightly naughty behavior intended to cause harm or damage 2) damage or harm, and an act that causes harm damage. Here the meaning was broadened by Mitchell to make a metaphor for his misbehavior of gambling. The listener Langham was able to understand because he witnessed Mitchell gambling and shared his positive attitude towards the action of gambling at that moment.

2.3. Scene 3

This scene was the conversation between Phil, who felt guilty about neglecting Claire, his wife, because of his preparation for a magic society, and the butler Higgins, who offered to set up a special bath to help Phil comfort Claire.

2.3.1 Narrowing

The lines of the following example came from Higgins after Phil complimented him for his excellent advice.

Example:

I've just been in the bath-buttling business
since the early '90s, despite my fresh face.

The word 'fresh' has the meaning of 1)(usually food) recently produced or picked and not frozen, dried or preserved in tins or cans 2) pleasantly clean, pure, or cool 3) looking clear, bright, and attractive, etc. The word 'fresh-faced' means having a young, healthy-looking face. The phrase 'fresh face' was a variant of 'fresh-faced' taking the extended meaning of 1) referring to a young face of a person who hadn't much experience in the workplace. Relating to 'fresh-faced' which is usually used in daily life, Phil had no obstacle in narrowing the word phrase to the certain meaning also with the aid of the context.

2.3.2 Broadening

The following example was from Phil and Higgins' conversation when Phil was asking for extra service to please his wife.

Example:

One of those -- one of those luxury baths.

'Luxury baths' referred to the bath packages of different themes the hotel offered for extra charge. The phrase itself doesn't have the meaning mentioned above. However, it was broadened successfully in the conversation of Higgins and Phil in the certain situation as they were the server and the customer in the hotel room where Phil was consulting about the hotel's extra service. It was because

the different character Phil and Higgins understood they were playing in the conversation with clear aim of the butler serving the customer who was willing to pay the price that the broadening of this phrase worked well in Higgins' speech for both the participants.

2.3.3 Metaphor

The line in the following example was Phil asking Higgins if he had any advice to comfort his wife.

Example 1

I'm in a tight spot with my lady.

You know what might help?

He used 'a tight spot' to refer to the worsening situation he believed he and Claire was in. Tight has the meaning of being very hard to resist and avoid. The word 'spot' here was taken for the implication of the stage Phil felt his relationship with Claire went to. In the conversation, tight spot was used as an 'ad hoc'[1]. This phrase cannot affect without the context of Higgins, the receiver of the line, noticing Phil's trouble as Phil articulated in this life, 'with his lady', as well as the conversation Phil had with him before which showed Phil's concentration on his relationship with his wife. Only with Higgins' understanding of the situation can he understood Phil's speech as the phrase 'tight spot' extended to refer to the tension in the relationship.

2.4. Scene 4

This scene was about Jay's meeting with Burt Tanner, the owner of the hotel, to ask him for a promotion of he and his family's exclusive level for better service. In a previous conversation, Jay asked Higgins to get him some Cuban cigar and 'Scotch delivery' which he referred to strong Scotch alcohol. However, Higgins didn't fully understand. Meanwhile, Claire ordered a dance of Scotch strippers for Mitchell and Cameron to fix their relationship and Gloria, a Latino who had the tanned skin and look just like Cubans, had just came back to Jay's hotel room.

2.4.1 Narrowing

In this extract, Jay was trying to be plain with Burt asking for higher level service in the hotel.

Example 1

Jay: I'm gonna cut to the chase. I like your lifestyle. I want a taste of it.

Burt: Well, s-sure, that's flattering, but...

The phrase 'cut to the chase' is an idiom in English narrowing the meaning of 'chase' to the extension of 'the act of running or driving after something in order to catch it'. The idiom used here revealed Jay was eager to go to the main subject of the meeting for a further negotiation, which worked as 'stop wasting time and start talking the most important thing' in Jay's speech. Besides, 'cut to' has the meaning of to reduce the size, amount or number of something. In Jay's line, the meaning of both 'cut to' and 'chase' was narrowed according to the aim of the conversation with Burt, which Jay was trying to reveal. As the idiom was also frequently in daily communication, Burt was able to guess about Jay's expectation and keep informed in the conversation.

2.4.2 Broadening

In the first example, Jay was persuading Burt into believing he had the same fine taste.

Example:

Like you, Burt, I enjoy the finer things.

As a matter of fact, that's probably the Cuban I ordered for you.

This line was from Jay when he heard a knock at the door and opened the door to show Burt his Cuban, which he meant the fine Cuban cigars he asked Higgins to get him However, the one came in was only his Latino wife, Gloria. According to the information Burt got from Jay's speech and the show-up of Gloria, it was easy to broaden the meaning of 'the Cuban' to a wrong way as the Latino beauty. Jay tried to broaden the meaning of 'the Cuban' in his words referring to the Cuban cigars he ordered. However, Burt understood it as Gloria. Neither of the two made any mistakes based on the

different information they got, though the broadening went to two completely different ways. It was caused by the input of information from a sudden situation which related to not only the lexical expression but also the other information input apart from the conversation.

After the misunderstanding of the Cuban, Burt got another gift from Jay——the Scotch delivery, which were a group of Scotch strippers instead of what Jay asked Higgins to get, the Scotch alcohol.

Example:

Higgins: The Scotch delivery *you had me on the lookout for, sir.*

Burt (to Jay): I like your style, Pritchett. You're in.

There were three people involved in the 'Scotch delivery' conversation, and they broaden the implicature to three differensuyrt ways. The speaker, Jay, meant the fine Scotch alcohol. Receiver 1, Higgins, didn't get the clear meaning of the phrase. He failed to broaden the 'Scotch delivery', however, he couldn't ask to damage his reputation as a reliable butler of the hotel who understood all his customers wanted. Receiver 2, Burt, as in the first analyses of the broadening in Scene 4, took the implicature as the Scotch strippers as he saw them when the door was open. There was asymmetric information for all three of the participants so that they could not broaden the phrase in the same way. As a result, the misunderstanding showed up

3. Teaching Recommendations

According to the analyses above, native speakers broadly use narrowing, broadening, and figurative speeches such as metaphor and puns in daily communication. To reach the goal of better understanding, where English works as a communication tool. It is better not only stick to the lexical meanings of words and phrases in classes, which most English classes at schools in east Asian are practicing in order to make students get better scores in important examinations. To improve the situation, some suggestions are as follows.

Firstly, the teachers should consider adding English conversation practice in class. Here the conversation doesn't mean following the template of certain sentence patterns. It refers to free-talks of a certain topic. The teacher can name specific words and phrases which can be flexibly used in the topic to help students better understand. After the conversation, each student should write a review of all the information they get from the conversation to be assessed if the communication is effective.

Subsequently, audio and video clips of English conversations should be used in class as tools to help with understanding. The teacher should point out the different uses which fit with the context and make explanations. Popular sitcoms such as Modern Family and Big Bang are recommended as the humor in these series usually don't make students bored.

4. Conclusion

This paper focused on the lexical pragmatics analyses of 4 selected scenes from episode 18 of the Season 5 from Modern Family, a popular sitcom in America. Three sections including narrowing, broadening, and figurative speeches, were analyzed respectively for each scene. It was found that in some conversations, the listeners had no problem understanding the conversation based on context and common use of idiom no matter the speakers were applying narrowing, broadening, or other figurative speeches in the words. However, there were circumstances when speakers and the accepters kept the conversation smooth, though the words and speeches were understood in different ways based on other information. Two recommendations were provided for English teaching in east-Asian countries, especially the classes aiming for higher level of using English as a communication tool instead of examination bar, which were setting up free-talk conversation part and using audio and video clips to improve effectiveness in students' abilities in English communication.

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