

A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to Deliberate Misinterpretation in *The Big Bang Theory*

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Abstract:

This study makes a qualitative analysis of the realization mechanisms of deliberate misinterpretation (DMI) based on Sperber and Wilson's Relevance Theory. The realization mechanisms of DMI contain the external factors which are further divided into explicit and implicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances, and internal factors which includes logical information, lexical information and encyclopedic information. The dialogues extracted from the sitcom *Big Bang Theory* are used to demonstrate each type. The relevance theoretic approach to DMI contributes to illustrating DMI more widely at the pragmatic layer of communication.

Keywords: deliberate misinterpretation (DMI); Relevance Theory; realization mechanism of DMI

1. Introduction

Communication is indispensable to human beings for expressing their points of view. Crucial and meaningful to our life, it involves a very complex process. To be brief, it contains two parts: the speaker (message senders) and hearer (message receivers). The success of a conversation needs the work of both parts.

Conversations proceed successfully most of the time. The speaker expresses his thoughts clearly and fully, and the hearer hears and interprets the speaker's expressions very well. But there are still some times that are faced with failure of conversations. That is because the speaker may lose or miss some elements of her thoughts. At that time, the hearer must supply the lost elements during the understanding process. When the hearer supplies the elements that are identical with the speaker's intended ones, the conversation moves forward successfully. But there are some circumstances when the hearer interprets the hearer with some faults, thus misunderstanding occurs. However, the hearer may get the speaker's thoughts correctly and totally but deliberately choose the utterances which carry different thoughts from the speaker's intended ones. This is called DMI. This study will focus on the latter phenomenon - DMI.

Reasons for choosing DMI as the object of this study are as follows.

Firstly, DMI is very commonly used both in daily lives and literary works. It's a phenomenon that most of people experience themselves or, at least, hear from the surroundings. Study on this phenomenon can strengthen our understanding abilities and enhance our communicative skills.

Secondly, it's an efficient strategy to achieve specific communicative effects or goals. Intentionally or not, people use this method very often to tactfully expose their feelings, moods, attitudes, views, and so on. Study on this strategy can help people express themselves clearly, efficiently, or even humorously.

Thirdly, it is not easy for people to say "No". Some people may consider refusing others directly as impolite. DMI is a good way to indirectly refuse or oppose others. And this will not be less polite than direct "No".

The framework of this paper is Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson. They think that the communication is not a coding-decoding process, but a cognitive-inferential process. The speaker produces utterances that express his cognition. Then the hearer draw inferences based on the elements provided by the speaker's utterances. Besides, the hearer relies on his present context to determine his language form and strategies. The context plays a crucial role in the process. Besides, the Relevance Theory claims that mutuality is the reason why the communicators are able to find out the intended meanings from a number of possibilities. It is also a premise for studying realization mechanisms of DMI.

The given examples are extracted from the American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*.

This relevance-theoretic approach to deliberate misinterpretation in the American situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory* not only expands the pragmatic application of Relevance Theory, but also illustrates more widely the deliberate misinterpretation at the pragmatic layer of communication. And study on this language phenomenon is useful and helpful in improving communicative skills and building harmonious interpersonal relationships.

2. Literature Review

Studies on DMI can be divided into three aspects- logical, rhetoric and pragmatic perspectives.

Wang Jianping (1989) studied ambiguity from the perspective of logic, believing that contextual ambiguity may lead to ambiguous interpretation which included DMI from his point of view.

Rhetorical figures in Chinese, such as Sheqi (设歧), Qiyi (歧义), Qushi (曲释) and Feibai (飞白), are related to DMI. DMI is an intentional conduct for some communicative goals (Wang 1993: 230).

Fisher (1987) studied misunderstanding, and Weigand (1999) and Tzanne (2000) put forward "planned misunderstanding" and "intentional misunderstanding" respectively. At home, He Ziran and Shen Zhiqi have made numerable researches on DMI from pragmatic perspective (2004). They have paid pioneering efforts in drawing a distinction between misunderstanding and DMI systematically. They studied the triggers, realization mechanisms and pragmatic functions of DMI. The use of DMI is constrained by some rules. We should not use it casually or overly, otherwise negative effects may be created.

At home, studies on *The Big Bang Theory* contain three perspectives- translation, linguistics and cross-cultural communication. However, few foreign linguists have ever paid attention to this sitcom.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Relevance Theory

As the processes involved in DMI are utterance interpretation and utterance production, Relevance Theory is fit for this study since this theory illustrates these two terms very well.

3.1.1 Ostensive-Inferential Communication

Sperber and Wilson believe that there are two sorts of interpersonal model. The first is code model, and the second is inferential model. Language communications involve both two models. But in real communications, the ostensive- inferential process is the principal model, and the coding- decoding process is attached to the ostensive- inferential process (He Ziran & Ran Yongping, 1993:94).

3.1.2 Cognitive Assumption

Cognitive assumption is equal to contextual assumption. With the premise of explicature, the hearer makes contextual assumption based on three kinds of information: logical information, encyclopedic information and lexical information. Different people have different cognitive structure. The cognitive context differs from each other; as a result, the inferential results, namely implicatures are identical. Sperber and Wilson (2001:122) claims that “an assumption is relevant in a context if and only if it has some context effect in that context”. An independent utterance may cover a lot of meanings, but the intended one must be related to the specific context. The utterances that the hearer receives sometimes may be incomplete, but he can still work out the referent of the omitted utterances.

3.1.3 Principles of Relevance

Sperber and Wilson think that each ostensive utterance should be assumed that the utterance itself is endowed with the best relevance. In communications, the speaker displays his informational and communicative purposes through ostensive behavior, which provides the premise for inference. Then the hearer, according to the speaker’s ostensive behavior, conducts the inferential process, which is a process to look for relevance.

3.2 Realization Mechanisms of DMI

Based on the ostensive- inferential communication and cognitive context, we can study the realization mechanisms of DMI from two aspects: the speaker and the hearer.

The utterance spoken by the speaker provides a premise for the occurrence of DMI; as a result, the utterances of the speaker can be seen as the external factors in the realization of DMI. According to the implicature and explicature concepts in Relevance Theory, a speaker’s utterances include two sorts of meaning: explicit meaning and implicit meaning. In real communications, the speaker gives his utterances with intended meanings, but his utterances still has more than one

possible interpretations. DMI can be realized due to the indeterminacy of explicit meaning in the speaker's utterances and the indeterminacy of implicit meaning in the speaker's utterances. Based on this, the external factors can be subcategorized into two aspects: explicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances and the implicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances.

The hearer uses all sorts of means to achieve DMI through the triggers contained in the utterances of the speaker, so the utterances of the hearer can be seen as the internal factors in the realization of DMI. According to Sperber and Wilson, the process of contextual assumption is the inferential process. As I have mentioned in the Chapter 2, the hearer makes the cognitive assumption based on three kinds of information. So according to this, the internal factors can be subcategorized into three aspects: logical information, lexical information and encyclopedic information.

Figure 3-1 illustrates the relationships of all involved factors.

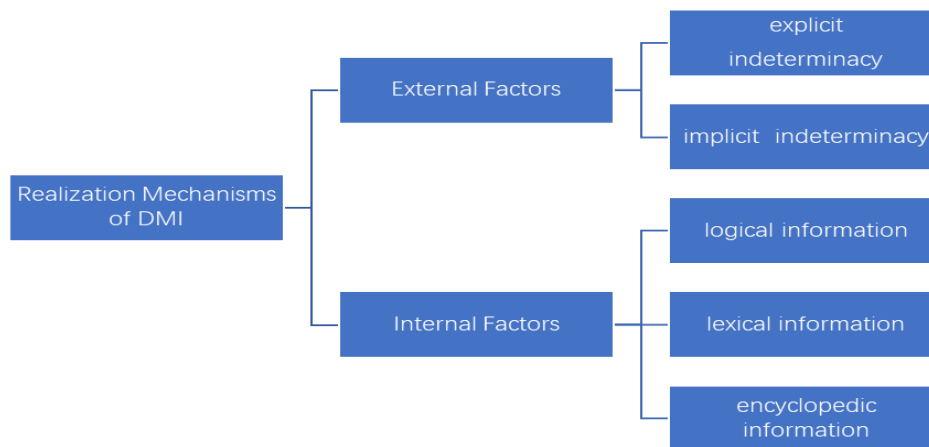


Figure 3-1 Realization mechanisms of DMI

4. Methodology

This chapter presents the research questions of this study, and introduces the data source. This study has the American situation comedy *The Big Bang Theory* as the source of data. The materials include the videos and the transcription of this comedy.

4.1 Research Question

DMI occurs commonly in daily conversations. It can, in some way, reflect the language competence of the language users. As a communicative strategy, DMI is used to fulfill a wide range of communicative goals and effects. The study of its realization mechanism can help us have a clearer understanding of this strategy and improve our communicative ability in some way.

Relevance Theory has great power to explain communications. Therefore, this study, under the framework of Relevance Theory, aims at providing a systematic account of the realization mechanism of DMI, and answering the following questions:

- (1) What are the realization mechanisms of DMI from the perspective of external factors?
- (2) What are the realization mechanisms of DMI from the perspective of internal factors?

4.2 Data Source and Data Collection

This research is corpus-based with data selected from the American situation comedy- *The Big Bang Theory*.

The Big Bang Theory is created by Chuck Lorre and Bill Prady, the executive producers. The series renewed in 2017 has brought its total to twelve seasons

It tells a story about four scientists with beautiful girls: Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, both physicists at Caltech, who are roommates; Howard Wolowitz, aerospace engineer; Gaj Koothrappali, astrophysicist. The main settings are Sheldon and Leonard's apartment, Howard's apartment and the stairway. They four make up a genuine geek team. Because they are all scientists, they possess uncommon cognitive background divergent from common people. So a lot of hilarious and humorous stories are created among them.

The situation comedy possesses outstanding advantages for the study of DMI. First and foremost, the stories in the situation comedy tend to be based on the various scenes of daily life. The conversations in *The Big Bang Theory* are very interesting and cover numerous communicative skills and strategies. As a result, verbal communications in the sitcom are proper data source for pragmatic research. Furthermore, situation comedy is a genre of comedy performance. To achieve humorous effects, various pragmatic strategies, including DMI, are used frequently. So *The Big Bang Theory* is a good data source for the present study.

Before writing this paper, I have watched this sitcom again and again, looking for conversations covering DMI in order to illustrate the views in this paper.

5. Results and Discussion

According to the Relevance Theory, communication is an ostensive-inferential process. From the perspective of the speaker, it is the ostensive process that manifest his intentional information. In this process, the speaker wants to attract the attention of the hearer to his utterances. From the perspective of the hearer, it is the inferential process that exposes his intention based on the information presented by the speaker. In this process, the hearer tries to understand the meanings of the speaker's utterances, combine the contexts and choose the strategy and content of his reply. The realization mechanisms are studied from the perspectives of the two perspectives.

In this chapter, we study the realization mechanisms of DMI from two aspects: the external factors (the elements of ostension offered by the speaker through his utterances to achieve DMI) and the internal factors (the elements of inference presented by the hearer to achieve DMI).

5.1 External Factors

The external factors refer to the elements in the speaker's utterances that contribute to the realization of DMI. Although the utterances of the speaker can have various potential interpretations, the hearer is competent enough to find out the relevance. By this we mean that there might be several identical possible interpretations about an utterance and that the hearer determines, through the inferences he draws, which of these potential meanings is the very one that is consistent with the speaker's intended one. But the ambiguity in the speaker's utterances do provide possibilities for the hearer to deliberately misinterpret his intentions. That is, the indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances offers the ground for the realization of DMI. In this study, external factors are subcategorized into explicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances and implicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances. The explicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances is subcategorized into propositions and deictic expression. The implicit indeterminacy in the speaker's utterances is subcategorized into the speaker's indirect speech acts and conversational implicatures. All these are shown in Table 5-1.

Table 5-1 External factors contributing to the realization DMI

| External Factors | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|-----------------------------|
| Explicit Indeterminacy in the Speaker's Utterances | | Implicit Indeterminacy in the Speaker's Utterances | |
| indeterminacy of propositions | indeterminacy of deictic expression | indirect speech acts | conversational implicatures |

5.1.1 Explicit Indeterminacy in the Speaker's Utterances

a. Propositions

A single proposition often has more than one meanings and people tend to mix the meanings, because of the polysemy, homophony, the fuzziness of the propositions and so on.

1) Penny: Okay. Well, then, there's a couple of things you should probably know.

Sheldon: I have a master's degree and two doctorates. The things I should know, I do know.

Penny: My point is, I know more about dating than you...

(Season 4 Episode 1)

In the example 1), Penny and Sheldon are talking on their way to Sheldon's dating spot. This is Sheldon's first date. Jenny has a lot of experience in dating, so she wants to give some suggestions to Sheldon. She tells Sheldon he needs to know "a couple of things" which means things about dating. But because the word "things" covers a wide range of objects, Sheldon utilizes this broad concept and chooses the general meaning of "things" because it's not easy for him to

admit that another person knows more than him.

2) Howard: Sheldon, we could be contributing to a weapon system that oppresses mankind for the next thousand years.

Sheldon: Okay, Howard's on board. What do you think, Leonard?

(Season 10 Episode 1)

In the example 2), the Air Force contacted Howard about their quantum gyroscope. Sheldon wants to join in. But the others don't agree. Howard is worried that they could be "contributing" to a weapon system that may be a threat to human beings. However, since "contribute" may be interpreted "do good things", Sheldon intentionally misinterpret Howard's point of view in order to win Howard's support.

b. Deictic expressions

Deixis means "pointing" or "indicating". The linguistic form that accomplishes the "pointing" or "indicating" action is called deictic expression. The interpretation of any deictic expressions is dependent on the context. The hearer may sometimes deliberately ignore the present context or move to another context to produce a divergent interpretation from the speaker's intended one.

3) Howard: Did you upgrade his software last night?

Leonard: I think he might be learning on his own.

Rajesh: Then the robot uprising has begun.

(Season 10 Episode 9)

In this example, Sheldon was jealous of Bert, a geologist, who has just won a great scientific prize. One morning, Sheldon suddenly claims that he is saying congratulations to Bert, which is amazing and unbelievable to his three friends. Howard and Leonard refer Sheldon as a "robot" to express their wonder how stubborn Sheldon changes his idea. Raj knows they are referring to Sheldon, but he deliberately interpret "robot" as the real robots. Thus, DMI occurs. This proves again they are a geek team. Their concerns about all scientific matters usually create humorous effect.

5.1.2 Implicit Indeterminacy in the Speaker's Utterances

a. The speaker's indirect speech acts

The indirect speech acts refer to those in which the speakers perform illocutionary acts, such as requesting, advising, warning, promising and offering and so on, but expects the hearers to infer different illocution based on their shared contextual information (Zhou En, 2008).

4) Penny: Okay, fine. When's the date?

Sheldon: Now.

Penny: Now?

Sheldon: Hurry. We're going to be late.

Penny: Sheldon, did it ever occur to you that I might have other

plans?

Sheldon: I'm sorry. Do you have other plans?

Penny: Well, np, not per se, but...

(Season 4 Episode 1)

In this example, Sheldon plans a date with Amy, and he asks Jenny to drive him to the dating place. But he tells to Jenny about the dating in a hurry. So Jenny asks him if he has considered other people's plans when he asks for help. Actually, Jenny use a interrogative sentence to indirectly advise Sheldon to inform others in advance next time. However, Sheldon is an arrogant geek who tends to refuse other people's advice. So he deliberately misinterpret Amy's intention to let Jenny drive him to the dating spot as soon as possible without any reason for delaying.

5) Jenny's mother: Why did you have to go to jail?

Jenny's brother: It's called getting caught, mother!

(Season 10 Episode 1)

Jenny's brother has just been released from prison. He, with his parents, comes to Jenny's apartment to attend Jenny's wedding ceremony. Jenny's mother is ashamed of his son. She uses "Why did you have to go to jail?" to blame her son. But Jenny's brother is not ashamed of himself at all and even deliberately misinterpret his mother's blame as a interrogative question.

b. Conversational implicatures

The conversational implicature refers to the implied meaning expressed indirectly. In actual conversations, when the speaker produces an utterance that embodies conversational implicature, he expects the hearer to infer his implied meaning. However, since the speaker leaves space for the hearer to look around, the hearer may deliberately take use of the choices to misinterpret the speaker. Consider the following example:

6) Amy: But understanding how other people are feeling, that's a weak spot for you.

Sheldon: I've gotten much better at that.

Amy: Have you? How am I feeling right now?

Sheldon: what the... how should I know?

Sheldon: Excited? Itchy? Give me the first letter.

(Season 10 Episode 12)

In this example, Amy becomes angry because Sheldon doesn't care about her feelings at all, so she wants to tell Sheldon to think more for others. She tells Sheldon he should learn to understand other persons. Sheldon think he has made much progress. Then Amy angrily shouts to Sheldon with a question that sounds like a interrogative sentence but intends to express how angry and upset she is. Common people must know "How am I feeling right now?" here is equal to "I am very very angry!". But Sheldon doesn't seem like a person who can warmly console other persons. He clearly knows about Amy's present mood and Amy's implied meaning, but he pretends to answer Amy's "question". Because Sheldon is angry with Amy too, he intends to express his own angry mood to Amy.

5.2 Internal Factors

The internal factors refer to the elements in the hearer's utterances that contribute to the realization of DMI. When a hearer receives the speaker's utterances, he tries to interpret it and infer what intentions the speaker wants to extend. In fact, the inference process determines the meanings that the hearer chooses as his reply. Then according to the contextual environment, he will make decisions about language form and communicative strategy. To ensure the strategy is useful and effective, some conditions for the hearer must exist. With the framework of Relevance Theory, the conditions contain the mutuality of logical information, lexical information and encyclopedic information.

5.2.1 Logical information

The logical message consists of a set of inferential regulation which are appropriate for hypothetical deduction embodying the concept (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). If the hearer has divergent logical information, it would be possible for the hearer to deliberately misinterpret the speaker. Consider the example:

7) Sheldon: You realize, Penny, that the technology that went into this arm will one day make unskilled food servers such as yourself obsolete.

Penny: Really? They're going to make a robot that spits on your hamburger?

(Season 4 Episode 1)

In this example, their dinner is served by the robot. Amy is a waitress in a restaurant. Sheldon says the development of robot waiters will replace human waiters, like Jenny, to do the service job. Jenny understands Sheldon exactly what he means, but she deliberately point out the "service" that seems out of the range of a waitress's job- pit on the customer's food. DMI occurs due to their different cognitive background. Sheldon thinks that a waiter should provide good service and polite manners to all the customers, but Jenny believes even a waitress can do something not very polite in some circumstances.

5.2.2 Lexical information

One utterance may have more than one meanings. Although the context is decisive in choosing the exact meaning, it does offer possibilities to deliberately misinterpret the speaker due to the various concepts attached to the same word or phrase. Consider the example:

8) Penny: You know, I've always been curious. What was Leonard like when he was little?

Leonard's mother: Oh, I think you mean young. He's always been little.

(Season 2 Episode 15)

This is a dialogue between Jenny, Leonard's girlfriend, and Leonard's mother. On the way back to the apartment, they have a talk. Jenny is wondering what Leonard was like when he was young. She uses "little" to refer to "young". But Leonard's mother, like Sheldon, is strict in everything. She knows what Jenny means, but she reminds Jenny "little" also means small height of human's body. She deliberately misinterpret Jenny's intention in order to make Jenny more specific in her expressions.

5.2.3 Encyclopedic information

People with different encyclopedic knowledge may produce different interpretations towards the same object. This can also become a reason for the hearer to deliberately misinterpret the speaker's intended meaning. Consider the following example:

- 9) Raj: I-I just found a wobble.
Cleaner: Oh, do I need a mop?
(Season 10 Episode 8)

In this example, Raj is sitting in his office and observing the dynamic chart that reflects the activities of stars. He suddenly finds a gravitational wobble. He excitedly tells the cleaner who comes in right now. But the cleaner pretends Rajesh is telling her the floor is slippery, so she asks Raj if she needs to take a mop to move away the water on the floor. "Wobble" means to move from side to side. Here, due to the different jobs of Raj and the cleaner, they have different encyclopedic messages about this word. Their identical cognitive background results in the realization of DMI.

6. Conclusion

DMI is commonly used in daily conversations and literary works. It acts as a language phenomenon and a communicative strategy. This study focuses on the realization mechanism of DMI in *The Big Bang Theory* with the theoretic framework of Relevance Theory. Theoretically, this study may expand the application scope of Relevance Theory. Pragmatically, this study may enrich the researches of DMI. Practically, this study may help people have a better knowledge of the jokes and stories in *The Big Bang Theory*; also hopefully, this study can help people know more about this language phenomenon so as to utilize this communicative strategy to realize communicative purposes.

Based on the Relevance Theory, realization mechanism of DMI is categorized into two aspects: the external factors (from the perspective of the speaker) and the internal factors (from the perspective of the hearer). The external factors are subcategorized into the indeterminacy of explicit meanings in the speaker's utterances which include the indeterminacy of propositions and deictic expressions, and the indeterminacy of implicit meanings in the speaker's utterances which include indirect speech acts and conversational implicature. The internal factors are subcategorized into logical information, lexical information and encyclopedic information. Certainly, there exist circumstances where more than one methods are involved.

Theoretically, this study intends to expand the application scope of Relevance Theory. Pragmatically, this study may enrich the research land of DMI. Practically, this study may help people have a better knowledge of the jokes and stories in *The Big Bang Theory*; also hopefully, this study can help people know more about this language phenomenon so as to utilize this communicative strategy to realize communicative purposes.

Although some demanding work has been done in this study, there are some limitations. First of all, the corpus-based study may contain some subjective elements to some extent in the analysis process, although the author has been tried to minimize the personal influence. Secondly, this study just analyzes the realization mechanisms of DMI. This phenomenon has more aspects worth analyzing and studying.

All the limitations mentioned above should be improved in further studies on this issue. Some empirical surveys on this topic need to be carried out in the future in order to make the results more objective. Furthermore, the relations between DMI and Relevance Theory should be further analyzed. The theory can be applied in studying other aspects of DMI.

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