

# A Study on the Characteristics and Indicators of Meta-pragmatic Awareness

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**Abstract**—Three characteristics of meta-pragmatic awareness are discussed in the thesis—salience, reflexivity and self-monitoring. The latter two are more prominent in the generation and choices of language. One is the reflexive comments of language on itself, the other is the observation and monitoring of consciousness upon itself. The thesis also probes into the explicit and implicit indicators left by meta-pragmatic awareness in perspective of phonetics, lexical level, syntax and discourse, as well as their pragmatic implications.

**Keywords**—meta-pragmatic awareness; characteristics; indicators; pragmatic implications

## I. INTRODUCTION

According to Adaptation Theory, the generation and interpretation of senses is the result of negotiation and adaptation in verbal communication. Language users need to make a dynamic choice from diverse languages when uttering a word or sentence. These relatively free language choices occur in the language users' awareness, consciously or unconsciously. "The whole process of the linguistic choices happens in the brain, which belongs to the category of consciousness."<sup>[1]</sup> Since it is prior to linguistic choices, Verschueren called it meta-pragmatic awareness, which shows three main features.

## II. THE CHARACTERISTICS OF META-PRAGMATIC AWARENESS

### A. Salience

Verschueren believes that in the process of adaptation, people make conscious or unconscious choices in language use after negotiation and adjustment. These choices are under different degree of meta-pragmatic awareness, that is, on the scale of implicit and explicit markedness. "When the degree is high, the storage of knowledge – prototype, proposition, schema (cultural schema, physiological schema), frame, draft, the social representation – will be activated frequently and actively. Accordingly, the adaptation in phonetics, morphology and sentences is highly conscious, and the speaker will employ some pragmatic strategies to quickly achieve his communicative intention well,"<sup>[2]</sup> such as parenthesis and humors, etc.

On the contrary, meta-pragmatic awareness in some cases is implicit in linguistic choices. When the speaker is in a familiar, friendly or relaxed situation, his conscious effort is relatively less, and it's hard to find the meta-pragmatic markers. Hou Jinguo (2003) argues that "The long term match between certain concepts and certain linguistic practices will form a conventional linguistic mind, that is, the usual way of talking and thinking."<sup>[3]</sup> At that time some meta languages are used with high convention, almost with subconsciousness and unconsciousness, such as the choice of personal pronouns and the tense of verbs.

On the markedness scale of meta-pragmatic awareness, there is no clear boundary between the implicit and the explicit. It is variable. "As a psychological factor, there is no need and scale to measure meta-pragmatic awareness accurately."<sup>[4]</sup> In the generation process of languages and senses, the markedness and features of awareness vary according to different people. They are related to the cultural and educational background of the language users, which Verschueren calls "social mind".

### B. Reflexivity

Meta-pragmatic awareness differs from other consciousness in the fact that it can reflect the speaker's observation of what he is saying and how to say. Verschueren (2000) assumes that all linguistic choices are under a certain degree of awareness, some of which are fully self-reflected.<sup>[5]</sup> This reflexivity means that the natural language can describe itself. A communicator can not only focus on the content of communication, but also pay attention to the communication itself. He can describe, define, and comment on the communication itself. For example, "In summary....." is an indicator to summarize the whole text. "An unnamed official said....." shows that the following statements are not his. Using vague language and humor can break the embarrassment. A speaker can adjust the sentence sequence to empathize a point. In a word, a communicator knows clearly what they want to say or what the audience might want to hear. He makes every linguistic choice which is suitable for the context before or during the process of communication.

However, it is not necessary to ensure the success of communication by planning in advance and focusing on the contents of communication. The communicator needs to

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control and adjust the process according to the communicative situation, which is known as the self-monitoring.

**C. Self-monitoring**

“On the markedness scale of meta-pragmatic awareness, the highest is the real self-monitoring. Language users always monitor their own words and the way of forming them..... Hesitation and error correction are one of the most obvious manifestations of the process.”<sup>[6]</sup> According to the current communicative situation, speakers can plan in advance or consider the form and strategy in language outputs, monitor and control the process of the discourse. This kind of self-monitoring is shown as the redefinition, affirmation and repetition in communication, such as, “that is to say.....”, “..... I think so.” “What do you mean by...?” In a passage, it is shown as a general statement of the following parts and a summary of the above.

To sum up, the three characteristics of meta-pragmatic awareness are interrelated. They can be simplified as reflexivity and self-monitoring. One is the meta-reference of meta pragmatic indicators in lexical level, the other is the self-reflection of consciousness on itself.

**III. THE INDICATORS OF META-PRAGMATIC AWARENESS**

It is difficult to measure meta-pragmatic awareness due to its abstractness, but metalanguage and meta-pragmatics are the embodiment of meta-pragmatic awareness. With the above three characteristics, the choices of these metalanguage can be reflected in many aspects of language, such as code, phonetics, morphology, semantics, syntax, discourse and so on. Verschueren (1987) argues that, in the interpretation of discourse and text, we need to focus on those language structures, which are chosen with significant communicative value in adaptation, esp. the corresponding pragmatic implications.<sup>[7]</sup>

This thesis defines all those linguistic markers of meta-pragmatic awareness as “the indicators of meta-pragmatic awareness”. Because what Verschueren discussed about the markers is unsystematic and without a relatively clear classification, the writer makes a table to show these indicators and discusses some of them in details. “Table I”

TABLE I. THE INDICATORS AND DISCUSSES SOME OF MARKERS

Implicit Indicators	Explicit Indicators		
Lexical Level	Code	Lexical and Morphological Level	
Personal Reference	Code Switch	Vagueness 1. Pragmatic Vagueness 2. Hedges	Discourse Markers 1. Cohesive Device 2. Words of Cognition and Attitude 3. Words of Information Resources
			Syntax and Discourse 1. Quotation and Mention 2. Discourse Structure A. Parallelism B. Emphasis

**A. Code Switching**

Code switching is a term to describe the alternation of language and code, which is in relation to certain groups, social activities and communicative functions. It is used to show feelings and affinity, or to display and maintain power. For example, “Well, I, done a li ‘observin’ now.” (I’ve done some valuable things now.) The speaker converted the standard English into black American English in his campaign speech, in order to bridge the gap with the audience. On the contrary, if a black American, in his own language community, uses standard American English instead of their common language, he is likely to demonstrate his knowledge or social status. Verschueren believes that code switching is related to meta-pragmatic awareness to some extent, but not all code switching is the indicators.

**B. Lexical and Morphological Indicators**

1) *Shifters*: Shifters refer to the pronouns and adverbs which is variable in reference according to the speaker’s different intentions, mainly including personal pronouns and other deixis (such as place, time, society and text deixis, etc.), such as you, he, here, there, now, in five minutes, president Liu, besides, following, etc.. These deixis “refer differently with the change of the context, and require the reflexive awareness”.<sup>[8]</sup> In order to make an correct understanding of these deixis, it is needed to know the reference points and their unconventional usages. Therefore, in the analysis of these shifters, it is necessary to take the speaker’s meta-pragmatic awareness, the dynamic and potential contextual factors into consideration. Take personal pronoun for example, in Obama’s speech in Fudan University, when reviewing the history of American people struggling for their so called “principles”, Obama used “We American” repeatedly instead of “American” or “American citizen”. He deliberately chose the plural forms of the first personal pronoun to modify “American”. It’s meta-pragmatic awareness about the construction of identification in facing foreign people, showing Obama’s pragmatic purpose of his pride and praise for American people.

2) *Discourse Markers*: Discourse markers are cohesive words, phrases and clauses which are of no true value, and have no effect on the understanding of the propositions, simply guiding and restricting the generation and interpretation of discourses. They are not parts of the information, but a hint to the audience. The speakers use them subjectively to guide the understanding of information (such as, the sources, the correction and affirmation of the information, etc.), and to avoid ambiguity. It is a communicative strategy and an explicit indicator of meta-pragmatic awareness.

Verschueren classified discourse markers into three categories: to express speakers’ attitude toward or the understanding of a proposition, such as, “have to admit that...”, “unfortunately”, “frankly speaking”, “of course”, “no doubt”; to show sources of information, such as, “It is

reported/said...”, “the gossip is...”; to demonstrate the coherence and logic in sentences and discourses, such as, “therefore”, “however”, “by the way”. These words, phrases and sentence structures, in some degree, show the speakers’ thinking, reflecting and considering before and in the generative process of a speech and discourse.

Discourse markers are the most typical manifestation of the reflexivity in meta-pragmatic awareness, because they directly comment or review the above and following discourse. They are explicit marks.

3) *Pragmatic Vagueness and Hedges*: In language use, there is always a kind of fuzzy words or utterance which make it hard to distinguish their connotation and extension, such as “almost”, “to some extent”. The way that some fuzzy words or means are used to achieve the special purpose of communication is called pragmatic vagueness. This kind of pragmatic vagueness is a strategic use of language, which is driven by different communicative intentions. Accordingly, the degree of meta-pragmatic awareness in the use of vague language is higher than that of using explicit language.

There are many ways to show pragmatic vagueness in a discourse, such as phonetics, vocabularies, sentences, conversational implicature and speech act, which can achieve a variety of pragmatic purposes and effective communication. In lexical level, the semantic fuzziness is a prominent embodiment. Take “sorry” as an example, after the airplane collision between America and China in 2001, China demanded the United States to apologize for it. The United States said “sorry”. As we all know, “sorry” means regret or apology. With the semantic vague word, the United States doesn’t admit his mistake, but still satiates the international public opinion, allowing the others to make their own judgment. Such a choice of words not only maintains his own reputation, but also fulfill the diplomatic mission.

In addition, Lakoff (1972) defines hedges as a kind of words which “make things fuzzy and vague”.<sup>[9]</sup> He Ziran(1985) classifies hedges into two categories: the variable and the moderate. The former limits or changes the truth and the interpretation of the following words, such as a little, probably, many; the latter does not alter the following proposition, but just showing the opinion of the third person or the judgment of the speaker, such as “I guess”, “what he said”, etc.<sup>[10]</sup>

In summary, a speaker can make use of lexical ambiguity to reduce the affirmation of a assertion, increase the flexibility of the speech, maintain the decency of the audience and himself and show his euphemism. In addition, a speaker can also employ some pragmatic means, such as conversational implicature and indirect speech act, to implement pragmatic vagueness. When a vague word or phrase is used in front of precise vocabulary to modify or substitute precise ones, it is a comment of language on itself, known as metalanguage. It is a result of negotiation and pragmatic choice made after the adaptation of context, which is a self-monitoring of the speaker’s meta-pragmatic awareness.

#### 4) *Syntactical Indicators and Discourse Organization*

a) *The direct and indirect speech is a relatively direct embodiment of the reflexivity of language*: In the direct and indirect speech, language is not completely uttered by the speaker, but is reported and mentioned. This borrowed text can show the speaker’s different meta-pragmatic awareness, such as supporting the argument, weakening the subjectivity etc..

b) *A speaker can highlight certain parts in his discourse and text by focusing on the structures, including the cohesion and coherence in it, the organization and sequence in a sentence, the arrangement of information and thematic structure*: For example, The parallelism, with symmetrical structure and melodic rhyme, can arouse the audience’s spirit easily. Because it is beautiful and overwhelming to hearings, it can easily highlight the parallel information. Emphatic structure is one of the main means to show intentions, which is the explicit embodiment of meta-pragmatic awareness. It is emphasized parts in a sentence that make emphatic structure. Concession is a strategy to progress by making concession firstly, which makes the communicative intention more prominent. Double negative can express affirmation. Compared with the affirmative form, it is marked, which is helpful to give prominence to certain information.

c) *The cohesive words in a text are useful to the generation and interpretation of a text, because they can not only illustrate the relationship between the whole and the part, but can emphasize a certain part*: The cohesive word is a device to express parallel, progressive, turning, summary and general statement, such as however, and, moreover, in a word and so on. Therefore, the audience can understand the speaker’s logic better on the whole. It is meta-pragmatic awareness that is showed in discourse organization.

In a word, the speaker, in the generation of a discourse, can plan in advance, think meta pragmatically, make adjustments in sentence structure and the text arrangement, choose the correct linguistic structure, highlight the important information, so as to better achieve certain pragmatic purposes.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Language is the carrier of thoughts. Language using and understanding involve the participant’s thoughts and mind. Different forms of language inevitably reflect different way of thinking. Adaptation of language is a process to choose language, in which people can adjust in various levels of language to satiate different communicative situation. In the process, the language users reflect on what they said, what they are saying and what they will said constantly, which is known as reflexive consciousness or meta-pragmatic awareness. Due to the different degree of meta-pragmatic awareness, there are different linguistic indicators left in language. It’s unavoidable to make choices in every level of language, which are of significant value in communication. Only by fully understanding meta-pragmatic awareness and

its indicators in language generation can we achieve successful communicative purposes and effects.

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