

A Pragmatic Analysis of White Lies from the Standpoint of Speakers*

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Abstract—The paper studies the pragmatic functions of white lies from the standpoint of speakers. From the perspective of pragmatics, white lies are regarded as a kind of pragmatic strategy that harmonizes interpersonal relationships and smooth social communication. The aim in this paper is to describe and explain the major pragmatic functions of white lies in communication with the help of politeness theory and other relevant theories, then to reveal the essence of white lies.

Keywords—white lie; politeness; pragmatic function; pragmatic strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

People believe “Honesty is the best policy”; however, a white lie, as a pragmatic phenomenon, is pervasive in our everyday communication. Speakers often use white lies to reach certain goals in a given situation. There is at least one view in ethics that sometimes a white lie may be used as one of strategies to reach a noble target; that is, deception can be competent when it is based on altruistic motivation. Pragmatics can be taken to describe this pragmatic phenomenon. According to He Ziran, language appropriateness and tactfulness are important in communication intending to make a harmonious relationship, outweighing the correctness of the proposition. Many scholars also assume that the appropriateness should become the highest pragmatic principle. Thus, we can use some related theories to explain the rationality of white lies from the perspective of pragmatics.

The study of white lies is rooted in the relevant theories: Grice’s conversational implicature and the Cooperative Principle, Austin’s Speech Act Theory, Searle’s Indirect Speech Act Theory, Leech’s Politeness Principle, Brown and Levinson’s Face-saving Theory and so on.

The study has far-reaching significance. In respect of theoretical significance, it is a further inquiry into politeness theory. Politeness is a hot and controversial topic. The study of politeness is popular with many fields and the documents came forward in large numbers in the past twenty years. What’s more, with the development of pragmatics and cognitive

linguistics, the lies research has drawn the attention of many scholars and made considerable progress. The thesis should make a little contribution to the study of white lies and politeness.

As for empirical significance, the study of white lies can help people improve communicative competence and improve emotional teaching in English learning.

II. DEFINING WHITE LIES

A white lie is a member of lies category. Lies are statements that the speaker believes to be false and that are intending to mislead the addressee (Bok, 1978). According to the motive and the interests between the communicators, lies can be classified into two categories: white lies (well-meaning lies) and malicious lies. White lies occur absolutely within a certain speech situation, namely, in connection with the belief, the attitude, the background of the culture, and the intentions of interlocutors. As a special mode of expression, a white lie has been defined as follows:

A White lie is a lie considered to be harmless, especially one told for the sake of being polite (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English with Chinese Translation Revised Third Edition).

A White lie is a harmless and small lie, especially one that you tell to avoid hurting somebody (Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary Sixth Edition).

White lies mean the speaker makes every effort to reduce the harm to the listener out of good will. One of the goals of a white lie is to maintain good interpersonal relations. Making inappropriate remarks will hurt the communicators.

According to the definitions of a white lie given in dictionaries, the meaning of a white lie discussed in this paper includes two respects: the altruism-oriented white lie with the deceptive intention; the implicature-oriented white lie with the intention of being understood. Both of them are used for the sake of politeness, owning three features: intentional duplicity, altruism and harmlessness.

III. THE RELEVANT THEORIES

The paper focuses on the process of politeness research, for the study of white lies is closely connected with politeness theory. Politeness is a very important principle in language use;

*Fund: This research is financially supported by the following projects.
Study on the Role of Teachers in MOOC+ Flip Classroom Teaching
Mode in the “Internet+” Era (Project No.15-29;Subject Grant
No.:GH170475).

Study on Scientific Research Motivation of Foreign Language Teachers
at Colleges and Universities in Jilin Province(No.[2016]99)

we must consider others' feelings. Politeness can be seen as indispensable to human interaction. Watts et al (1992:1) explains that the notion of linguistic politeness has to do with the way by which human beings "successfully manage interpersonal relationships to achieve both individual and group goals".

Grice connects the notion of linguistic politeness with his studies on conversational maxims. Conversation is a very important means to deliver and obtain information. In conversational exchange people usually try to reach a common goal by mutual efforts or at least make the conversation develop in the direction of their expectation. Grice has found some rules that apply and work in human conversation and established his theory of conversational implicature — the Cooperative Principle (CP). His CP suggests that speakers in verbal communication on the assumption that hearers are observing the same conversational maxims, unless they are confronted with unexpected indications. It plays a very important role in clarifying the relation between "sense and force" and how to generate and interpret conversational implicature, but it is in a weak position to elucidate why people are so often flouting the maxims and indirectly convey what they really mean. Among various reasons, Grice points out that a clash of maxims may lead to a compromise by holding one maxim while giving up another. The desire to make one's language interesting and increase its force may also lead to indirectness employment.

Robin Lakoff first inspected the polite phenomena from the perspective of conversational principles in her article "The logic of politeness; or, minding your p's and q's" in 1973. Lakoff suggests that in addition to abstract semantic and syntactic rules, language users follow rule of pragmatic competence for politeness. Her elaboration of Grice's original principles is developed further in Leech's work.

The academic study of politeness was a new field when Leech published his first paper on the subject — *Language and Tact* — in 1977, shortly before Brown and Levinson's more extensive and influential study appeared in 1978: "Universals of language usage: Politeness phenomena". Leech defines politeness as forms of behavior that establish and maintain community, or the ability of participants in a social interaction to engage in atmosphere of relative harmony. Leech proposes one of the most important reasons: Politeness Principle. It can be formulated in a general way from two aspects: to minimize, other things being equal, the expression of impolite beliefs and maximize, other things being equal, the expression of polite beliefs (He Ziran, 2003:82). Leech assumes that "The PP can be seen not another principle to be added to the CP, but as a necessary component, which rescues the CP from serious trouble" (Leech, 1983:80).

To date, the most influential politeness model is Brown and Levinson's Face-saving Theory (FST). The fundamental assumption of the theory is that human communication is rational, effective and purposeful. In their theory, Brown and Levinson define "face" as an "individual's self-esteem" or "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987:60). In 1978, they defined politeness as redressive actions taken to counter-balance the disruptive effect

of face-threatening acts (FTAs). Politeness strategies are developed primarily for the purpose of dealing with FTAs. Brown and Levinson sum up human politeness behavior in four strategies: bald on record strategy, negative politeness strategy, positive politeness strategy, and off record indirect strategy.

Early pragma linguistically oriented intercultural studies were conducted by Fraser (1978) and House (2001). Later studies include data-based intercultural investigations of impact of isolated social and context variables on norms of politeness. Thus "social distance" was examined and found to influence politeness in the realization of speech acts in complex way (Wolfson, 1989). Apart from these intercultural investigations of the influence of social variables on the enactment of politeness, specific features of speech acts such as "the imposition" incurred through the act have been contrasted: e.g. for requests; for apologies; for complaints. In a word, politeness can be understood as a social phenomenon, a means to achieve harmonious interpersonal relations, and a norm imposed by social convention.

As for Chinese politeness study, Gu Yueguo's paper (1992) proves to be outstanding. Tracing the origin of the notion of politeness in Chinese culture, he modifies some of Leech's assumption and puts forward some maxims such as the self-denigration maxim, the address maxim that are claimed to be unique features of Chinese politeness. Gu Yueguo's research has been reviewed, supported and amended by other Chinese scholars. So far, there are still many problems to be studied in politeness research.

IV. PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF WHITE LIES

As we know, the literal meaning of an utterance is sometimes not consistent with the true intention. Why do people sometimes deliberately choose to tell white lies instead of telling the truth? There may be some communicative intentions connected with this linguistic choice. Community members do not necessarily agree on which forms of behavior are the dominant ones in any particular community of practice. Searle (1969) holds the view that speaking a language is engaging in a form of intentional, rule-governed behavior, and people must observe some rules of illocutionary acts in interaction. In a speech act, the relationship between a grammatical form and a communicative function is accounted for by saying that each utterance is associated with a certain illocutionary force indication device or potential illocutionary act. We will make an exhaustive study on the major pragmatic functions of white lies. It is just these major pragmatic functions that make communicative intentions possible.

A. *The Illocutionary Function*

It is assumed that one of the major functions of white lies is to perform illocutionary function and produce perlocutionary effect, which leads to a successful communication. Let's suppose that all speakers, regardless of their cultural background, adhere to a basic principle governing the use of white lies, which is, being out of kindness. The thesis summarizes a range of main conversational uses of white lies that concern the following pragmatic functions. Among the five categories of illocutionary acts, directives and

commissives are the main concerns in the study of indirect speech acts. In everyday speech, when we ask others to do something for us, we usually use indirect language, that is, indirect speech acts, to reach our intended communicative goals, for the use of indirect language can help us maintain a good interpersonal relationships. Telling a white lie is an indirect speech act.

1) *Softening directive speech acts*: The illocutionary point of directives consists in the fact that they are attempts of varying degrees by the speaker to get the hearer to do something. They may be very modest attempts as inviting or suggesting, or they may be very fierce attempts as insisting, ordering, or commanding. By some linguistic means, we can change an inherently impolite speech act into a polite one. White lies are usually used to perform the functions of speech act of directives. A white lie can be regarded as a form of deep politeness that surpasses the formal politeness. It intends to avoid offence, which means mitigating or lessening the degree to which S's goals are imposed on H. There are four major types of directives: order, warning, advice and invitation. Take the order for example.

The action of order seems fierce and it is not easy to be accepted by everyone. In order to reduce the level of impoliteness of order, what we can do are: (a) changing the tone; (b) using the word "please"; (c) using sentence structures like "Will you...?" "Won't you...?" which seem to ask for the hearer's agreement. However, these methods are ideal and formal, which are not suitable for those nonconformists or the special occasions. Let's take Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice" as an example:

Shylock, who was spiteful towards Antonio, decided to offer his loan at no interest to Antonio who was short of resources and must use his credit for a loan; instead, he demanded a pound of flesh from Antonio if his loan was not repaid on time. Obviously, it was an unequal term. Unfortunately, Antonio had to implement the agreement. Nobody could change Shylock's idea, even the Duke. In this occasion, telling the truth in a polite way, order or request, is nothing but to make him more determined. As a result, Portia masqueraded as a judge who was invited by the Duke, and ordered Shylock to abandon his agreement and accept the punishment. The process of defeating Shylock is a process of testing the functions of a white lie.

First, Portia tells a lie that she is the judge, in order to save Antonio, who is a kind man. According to Leech's Tact Maxim in PP, "minimize cost to other; maximize benefit to other," here "other" refers to "the third party" Antonio in the conversation between Portia and Shylock. The speaker Portia speaks with the hearer Shylock in a judge capacity. Portia's intention is beneficial to Antonio, which is altruistic. The context factors include Shylock's stubbornness and tart disposition, which makes all formal polite truth quite helpless. Moreover, there exists racial discrimination to Jewish then, which is the culture background of the white lie. Rooted in these factors, Portia's lie can be regarded as a white lie.

Second, the white lie makes a great impact on the hearer Shylock for the sake of saving his face. In Brown & Levinson's

theory, they define "face" as an "individual's self-esteem" or "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (1987:60). Face is so sensitive to each participant that it is in the mutual interest of both parties to maintain each other's face. As mentioned above, for the sake of racial discrimination, Shylock's both positive face and negative face are damaged seriously. Portia does "off-record" FTAs to perform the FTAs indirectly. Her approach-based white lie can be seen as one of the positive polite strategies. At the same time, by championing Shylock's right and interest, the conversation can be continued. Just as Leech said, if you must cause offense, at least do so in a way which doesn't overtly conflict with the PP, but allows the hearer to arrive at the offensive point of your remark indirectly, by way of implicature (Leech: 82). No doubt, Leech's Approbation Maxim, Modest Maxim and Sympathy Maxim also can be used to explain the reasonability of Portia's white lie.

So, with the help of Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice", it can be tested that a white lie plays a surprising role in performing the act of order when there is a special speech situation. Here, it is necessary to state that politeness can be expressed not only in sentence structure but also the communicative intention.

2) *Committing the speaker tactfully*: According to Leech, offers, invitations and promises are intrinsically "generous" and in both English and Chinese, can be direct or even 'rude'. But white lies still play a positive role in performing these speech acts.

An example of offer taken from Gu Yueguo gives us a best explanation of a white lie (Gu Yueguo, qtd From Hu Wenzhong, 1998:504):

A: "I'll buy the chicken for you."

B: "Is that ok? It's too troublesome. Won't you go to the post office?"

A: "Convenient. No trouble at all. I'll put it on the truck."

B: "Thanks a lot."

After A's offer has been explored, and its degree of Generosity ascertained, B can then go ahead and accept it. The interesting point is that A's reassurance "Convenient. No trouble at all. I'll put it on the truck" is not felt to reduce A's politeness in that it shows consideration for B's politeness and so prepares the way for B to accept. There are two possible conditions for the speaker: the first is it is really convenient for A to buy the chicken for B; the other is A is telling a white lie in order to have B accept his sincere help because of a certain relationship between them. A's intension is to help B instead of being praised by B. Here, an experience is worthy to be mentioned. Once, I helped my friend to buy a gift. Out of my expectation, I made several trips to the store for the gift because of the seller's absence. What's more, I had to take a taxi to give the gift to her in time. When she expressed her appreciation and asked whether it had brought too much trouble to me, I said nothing but "That's easy". As a speaker who told a white lie, I do not want to make her, my close friend, feel guilty. It conforms to Gu Yueguo's Virtues-words-deeds Maxim: minimize cost and maximize benefit to other at the

motivational level, and maximize benefit received and minimize cost to self at the conversational level.

A more common example whether in western countries or in east countries can illustrate a white lie is helpful to provide an offer. That is the lie between the incurable patient and the doctor and family members. In line with the principle of maximizing benefit to other, a white lie is the best one to be used instead truth-telling.

The speech act of refusal is a face-threatening act because it contradicts the interlocutor's expectations. Its propositional content is that the speaker does some future actions. Refusal is often realized through indirect strategies, and requires a high level of pragmatic competence. Refusals of four types of situations are to be discussed in the paper, including refusal of request, invitation, offer, and suggestion. It is found that direct refusal (i.e., "No") was not a common strategy for any of the subjects, regardless of their language background. Among the strategies of mitigating refusals, excuses turned out to be one of the major strategies utilized by the English-speaking and Chinese people. It is observed that the Americans and the Chinese use different formulaic expressions in refusals and tend to apply different strategies, and that the Chinese are more indirect in using refusal strategies. The reason is related to the difference of social values between the two cultures, one being individually oriented and the other collectively oriented. Here we focus on discussing the refusal of requests.

Requests are attempts to get the hearer to do things for the speaker, so they are compliance-driven and intrinsically face-threatening activities, threatening the addressee's negative face. According to Yang Lihua's analysis, excuses turned out to be one of the major strategies utilized by the English and Chinese people to refuse the requests. Social distance, relative power and size of imposition, psychological distance between the communicators have influence on the speech act of refusal. Suppose three situations: 1.refusing a higher status boss's request for the subject to work extra hour; 2.refusing an equal status classmate's request for lecture notes; 3.refusing a lower status employee's request for an increase in pay. In refusing the boss's request to stay longer at work, the common excuses are: "I had promised my friends previously" or "I have a headache". In refusing a classmate's request for lecture notes, the white lie like "I have already lent them to someone else" is used to explain the unavailability of the notes. In response to the lower status employee's request, most of the subjects referred to the financial difficulty in the store though they had made a profit.

Although different expressions do exist owing to culture differences, one point is definite: in polite situation, when people have to decline a request, they do not wish to bruise the interlocutor with a blunt refusal, feeling that this might hurt his or her feelings or cause embarrassment, so white lies are chosen frequently.

3) *Expressing the speaker's attitude and opinion:* In this sense, a white lie can be used as a strategy to protect oneself, delay conflict and promote mutual development. Many examples can argue white lies have the function to evade the problem without hurting affection, stimulate a person to

further efforts and defend oneself or stand on one's dignity. B&L's FST is used more often to explain the use of white lies.

The following example tests the function of stimulating a person to further efforts.

There once was a story in Readers: on a school bus, a girl told the woman driver that she thought her necklace was stolen by an introverted boy. The woman driver was asked to search the boy. When she touched the necklace in the boy's pocket, she changed her idea that she would show the necklace to all the children because she met with the boy's pleading eyes. So she told a white lie to deny the boy's stealing. Ten years later, she received a card from the boy who was working as an accountant. He expressed his gratitude to her tolerance that had changed his life.

In this case, the woman driver considered the boy's face that was so important in a person's life. The white lie changed his whole life. The similar cases are not strange in any school or work place. From the perspective of psychology, everyone has the possibility to do wrong things. White lie gives us a chance to correct. Once the self-image in public is damaged, the person is easy to be low-spirited and do negative actions.

B. The Phatic Function

Generally speaking, people expect the information they get in communication to be consistent with the truth, but being true is not equivalent to precision. Ostensible speech acts are frequently found in daily conversation, including ostensible invitation, ostensible compliments, and ostensible congratulations and so on. The intention of ostensible speech acts is to perform the social, ritual and interacting functions to achieve a harmonious human relationship. For example, utterances such as "You're looking smart today!" "Your kids are so lovely!" sound comfortable and respectful, which make the hearer feel happy although he does not think they are right. We employ such utterances not for their propositional content but rather for their affective value as indicators that one person is willing to talk to another and that a channel of communication is being opened.

Leech (2005) claims "Much of our communicative behavior is neither polite nor impolite: leaving aside honorific systems, the PP needs to be invoked only for 'transactional' discourse, where as part of the illocutionary force or the perlocutionary effect, some element of value is transacted between S and O." By violation of the Quantity Maxim, the speaker triggers conversational implicatures and achieves certain pragmatic purposes, for example, to avoid restricting the speaker himself to too much responsibility as a defensive tactic, or to avoid talking about sensitive problems or letting the hearer know too much.

Why a white lie is popular in the communicative situation? A white lie functions as a positively affective speech act and can be considered as an effort to keep relationships solid.

We are talking about the communication of meanings. So people may secretly pursue selfish agendas. They may be insincere in flattering someone they admire. But such psychological motivations are irrelevant to the pragmatics of politeness. Pragmatics is interested only in communicative

behaviors, and politeness in a pragmatic sense is a matter of conveying meanings in accord with Leech's GSP. Honorific usage of politeness is a "conventionalized implementation of the constraints of Approbation and Modesty: giving high value to others, and/or low value to oneself." (Leech, 2005).

C. *The Interpersonal Function*

Brown and Levinson (1978) put forward that people engage in rational behavior to achieve satisfaction of certain wants. The wants related to politeness are the wants of face. A white lie has a function to maintain good relationships between people, namely, enhancing affection and improving personal relationships. We can describe as avoiding the hearer's misunderstandings, avoiding unnecessary argument and safeguarding the hearer's face. The following example is a good one to prove.

Some rhetorical questions expressing reproaches imply assertion in a certain situation, which displays a lack of politeness. Unfortunately, some people are used to expressing the feeling by this rhetorical question. White lie is the best weapon to relax the hearer's tension. By the aid of white lie, we can gain, maintain and promote intimate relationship because the speaker cares the hearer's feeling more than truth. For example,

Son: Why do you come back so late, mum?

Mother: Don't you know I go to the market? I'm dead tired.

Son: I am sorry. I wish I were beside you.

In fact, mother's impolite rhetorical question annoys the son, who implies: I am angry at your staying at home. You should know I need your help because I definitely bought many things in the market. What the son wants to say is: "It's not my fault that you are dead tired. I didn't ask you to buy so many things. Why don't you act according to your own capability?" To be frank, the truth sounds reasonable and guards the son's negative face, but it is really impolite. The truth will offend his mother and hurt her feeling. So, the son told a white lie to express his sympathy to his mother, which is of help to preserve a wholesome home atmosphere.

White lies are also needed between colleagues. A is one of B's husband's colleagues who has just finished a dinner at B's home.

A: It is so delicious, thank you.

B: Really? I am very glad that you like my cook. You are welcome at any time.

In order to illustrate the function of white lie, let's have a funny hypothesis: both A and B are lying by violating the Quality Maxim. A is telling a white lie because B's cook is terrible; B is telling a white lie because B knows her cook is terrible and B does not welcome A to her home, especially she doesn't like cooking for any guest. However, the conversation sounds warm and tactfully. Owing to the two communicator's politeness, the communication may be continued. Just as the Approbation Maxim in Leech's PP: minimize dispraise of other and maximize praise of other. Even though people know the utterance is false, they are still happy because of "face".

One point is worth noting that white lies have negative influence in communication as well. In our daily lives, compliments are sometimes misleading. In addition, compliment can be a face-threatening act, which is explained clearly by Holmes. Utterances intended for solidarity can be interpreted as sarcasm or perfunctory compliments intended for requests. These could be taken as pure praise or diplomatic compliments rather than genuine admiration. Sometimes compliments can be regarded as flattery. In addition, the speaker is likely to suffer from his white lie. There is a joke on it. A man praised soup made by the hostess for politeness although it tasted bad. So, the hostess always cooked the soup for the man when he came. When participants in communication regard the exchange of information as the most important thing, the truth is more important than a white lie.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper is intended to study white lies from the standpoint of speakers, which is focused on the main pragmatic functions that white lies can perform. In the previous parts, the thesis takes the statements that deviate from the truth or the speaker's subject facts as lies, which are classified into white lies and evil lies according to the motivation and interest. A white lie is regarded as an effective indirect pragmatic strategy that combines with three factors well — the speech situation, the communication goal and the pragmatic principle. Various pragmatic functions achieved by employing different white lies are illustrated with a lot of examples. As is known, the appropriate white lies embody the basic principle of being cooperative or polite in communication. Just as He Ziran said, politeness is not "only a simple matter of merely being verbally nice or sweet" without sincerity. The significance of telling a white lie is to harmonize interpersonal relationships and lubricate social communication; at the same time, it impels us to a further study of politeness.

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