



Pragmatic Analysis of Yu Hua's Novel *To Live*

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Abstract: As a subfield of linguistics developed in the late 1970s, pragmatics studies how people comprehend and produce a communicative act or speech act in a concrete speech situation which is usually a conversation. A pragmatic analysis is a set of linguistic techniques used by analysts to create systematic accounts of texts. They aim to find the whole range of inferences that a reader or listener might make when confronted with a writer's or speaker's locutions in context. This research paper tries to focus on the pragmatic analysis of the language discourse, context, and its function in the novel *To Live* based on Politeness Principle, Hedging strategies, Cooperative Principles, Conversational Implicature, and Speech Act. It may help readers to comprehend the novel with a deep understanding and to see the novel from different angles.

Keywords: pragmatic analysis, language discourse, context, function, *To Live*

1. Introduction

To Live (simplified Chinese: 活着) is a novel written by Chinese novelist Yu Hua in 1993. The narrative opens with the narrator journeying across the countryside in search of folk melodies and local folklore and hearing the life story of an elderly peasant. Fu Gui is the landlord's son. He goes down to undertake the honest labor of a farmer after spending his family's money in gambling dens and brothels following the tragic death of his father. His mother gets ill soon after, and when he goes into town to buy medication, he is forcibly drafted into the Nationalist Army. He faces the sufferings and miseries of the Chinese Civil War (1946-1949) after leaving his family behind. When Fu Gui returns home years later, he discovers that his mother has died and that his daughter Feng Xia has become deaf and dumb due to a severe fever. As he observes the death of one of his family members after another, he begins to endure a series of difficulties. You Qing, his only son, dies as a result of medical malpractice while donating blood to save the magistrate's wife. Years later, Feng Xia meets Er Xi, a suitable spouse who also has a disability--a crooked head. However, their happy life ends when Feng Xia dies while giving birth to their son Ku Gen. Soon, Fu Gui's wife Jia Zhen dies of osteomalacia (soft bone disease). In a construction accident, his son-in-law Er Xi dies. Finally, Fu Gui's only surviving family member, his grandson Ku Gen, dies after choking while eating beans. Only an elderly ox named Fu Gui (the same name as the main character) survives to be old Fu Gui's friend in his later years. Using time as the axis, Yu Hua told people about the difficulties of "living" through seven displays of the deaths of their loved ones, and deeply described the survival of the people at the bottom of the society during a special period of Chinese Civil War, the initial stage of New China. The process of these people's survival is a process of constant suffering and death. In the process of writing the novel, Yu Hua gives up the intellectual perspective of the elite, focuses on the sufferings of the people at the bottom from a folk standpoint. Moreover, through the unique narrative of the novel, he carries out black humorous mocking and criticism to the absurd social history and traditional thinking.

2. Pragmatic analysis

Pragmatics study examines the novel's context, discourse, and language function. The study of pragmatics focuses on the meaning of words in a certain moment and situation. The name of the novel *To Live* is ironic. Although it is called "*To Live*", it talks about the theme of death. "Fu Gui (fortunate and wealthy)", "Jia Zhen (a pearl in the home)", "Feng Xia (rosy clouds)", "Er Xi (happiness and joy)", "You Qing (Celebration)", their names are full of words filled with Chinese traditional auspicious and blessed meanings, their characters are so kind-hearted, tenacious, diligent, caring and adorable, etc. full of human virtues but their destiny is extremely sad, full of thorns and suffering. The irony is defined by Relevance Theory as an echoic speech with implicit attribution and attitude, with the implicit attitude being one of rejection, disapproval, derision, or the like. As the saying goes, tragedy destroys the valuable things of life. *To Live* forms a strong contrast between the tragic elements and great human virtue. What's more, the function of the narrative skills adds great weight to the tragic novel. For instance, at the end of the story, the novelist narrates "I know that the twilight is fleeting, and night is coming. I saw the vast land exposed, it was a calling gesture, just like a woman calling their children, the land calling the night". The "land" here is given the image of "mother", which symbolizes the origin and destination of life. The call of the land also implies the call of

death. This call is undoubtedly sentimental but does not produce a sense of fear, just like the setting sun. At the time of the sunset, the mother was standing at the door of the house and calling her son to go home, so walking towards "death" was to return to the embrace of the "mother".

'Politeness', according to Yule (1996), is a fixed term that may be defined as "polite social conduct, or etiquette, within a culture" (p. 60). Yule defines politeness as a set of principles that show civility in every social interaction, such as being considerate, generous, humble, and empathetic to others. In the novel *To Live*, when Jia Zhen found her husband was not loyal to their marriage, she prepared 4 dishes, each was covered with different vegetables on the surface but below that the same meat. Young Fu Gui knew Jia Zhen wanted to enlighten him: women may look different on appearance or out looking, but they are the same. Jia Zhen took full advantage of social psychology, a new dimension was given to the concept of politeness which was specified by Yule as "awareness of another person's face" (p. 60). Jia Zhen's tactful deeds followed the principle of politeness and saved her husband Fu Gui's face. No matter what sort of problem they face, the woman has put up with all of Fu Gui's sufferings and hard labor. She is a loving and stubborn woman who has never complained despite all of life's trials and tribulations, yet she dies of soft bone disorders after the deaths of both her son and daughter.

Hedging devices are a subset of pragmatic markers that serve to "soften the propositional substance of the communication". (Willamova,2005) Hedges, to put it another way, are pragmatic signals that "attenuate (weaken) the power of a statement" (p. 81). Hedging language is also known as cautious language or vague language. Hedging words and phrases are the things we write and say to soften our words, to make them less direct, and to limit or qualify claims and statements we make. For instance:

Young Fu Gui: I have squandered all of our fortunes in gambling.

Fu Gui's mother: What on earth do you mean?

Young Fu Gui: I have lost all the family property in gambling.

Fu Gui's mother: Like father, like son. (Howling and crying)

Jia Zhen: It will be fine if you don't gamble in the future. (weeping)

From the conversation, we can see hedge devices used here. When Fu Gui's mother said "What on earth do you mean?", she knew the fact well but she didn't want to accept the cruel reality. The utterance she used was less direct to show her strong emotion or feeling. Willamová (2005) defines pragmatic idioms as "minimal lexical devices that convey how the illocutionary force of an utterance should be understood". Pragmatic idioms are expressions with several meanings, both direct and indirect. They go beyond particular words' literal meanings. In the above conversation, "Like father, like son" is an idiom to indirectly express Fu Gui's mother's grief and sadness.

In the dialogue between two persons, the speaker tries to construct the linguistic message and intend a meaning, and the hearer interprets the message and infers the meaning (Brown and Yule 2). The meaning of words in communication will be understood based on both speaker and hearer's interpretation and contextual comprehensibility. The context helps to assume meaning in the text that is conveyed in communication. The speaker's meaning is dependent on assumptions of knowledge that are shared by both speaker and hearer. The theory of conversational implicatures is attributed to Paul Herbert Grice, who observed that in conversations what is meant often goes beyond what is said and that this additional meaning is inferred and predictable. For example, when the village leader said to Fu Gui, "Fu Gui, you made a great contribution!" Fu Gui felt confused and didn't know what those words mean. After that, the village leader added more, "Your family has boiled the steel out, in time for the good day of the National Day, we will go to the county government to announce the good news". When Fu Gui heard this, he was shocked. "I was still worrying that how could I explain that the bottom of the barrel might be broken. Who would have thought that the steel would be boiled out?" Then the village leader patted Fu Gui's shoulder and said excitedly, "The steel we smelt can make three big cannonballs, and they will be beaten to Taiwan. One-shot on Chiang Kai-shek's bed, one shot on his dinner table, one shot on his pit, so that he couldn't sleep, eat, or shit, let's liberate Taiwan". Here, the two speakers know well that Chiang Kai-shek is the leader of the Nationalist Party, after the founding of the People's Republic of China by the Communist Party, the Nationalist Party troops retreated to Taiwan. As a reader, if we don't know the context of historical events in China, we may get confused by their conversation. It was during that special period of historical time; every household was forced to steelmaking to contribute to the country's military force.

The Gricean maxims—quantity, quality, relation, and manner—divide the cooperative principle into Grice's four conversational maxims. These four maxims reflect unique rational principles noticed by persons who pursue efficient communication using the cooperation principle. The maxim of relation states where one tries to be relevant and says things that are pertinent to the discussion.

For example, Onetime Fu Gui said to his beautiful and adorable daughter Feng Xia:

Fu Gui: Xia, won't forget your dad, will you?

Feng Xia: Dad, won't you forget your daughter, will you?

It seems that the dialogue avoids the maxim of relation. Feigxia didn't answer her father's question directly. Instead, she used another question to seek his father's answer. Only those who read the novel will know the answer is definitely yes. However, such an innocent and smart child has become deaf and mute because of a fever after the conversation.

Conversational implicature, coined by H.P. Grice, refers to what is suggested in an utterance, even though neither expressed nor strictly implied or entailed by the utterance. That afternoon, the principal of You Qing's School, the wife of the county magistrate, gave birth to a child in the hospital. The school organizes children to donate blood. When the children heard it was blood to the principal, they were as happy as a holiday.

You Qing: It's my turn. I am the first one to be here.

Doctor: Roll up your sleeves.

After a while,

You Qing: I feel dizzy.

Doctor: People who take blood will feel dizzy.

You Qing died of excessive blood draw.

Fu Gui: Where is my son?

Another doctor: You mean You Qing?

Fu Gui nodded his head heavily.

Another doctor: How many sons do you have?

Fu Gui: Only one, please help him, please ...

Another doctor: Why do you have only one son?

Fu Gui: Was my son still alive?

Another doctor: No.

The innocent child didn't know that the god of death had quietly approached him, and he ran faster than anyone else, just to become the first person to have a blood transfusion. When his blood type matched the patient, he was very excited, as if he had become a hero, and immediately announced to his friends, "It's my turn". From the conversation, we can sense the implicature of the ruthlessness of the doctor when the blood was drawn and the numbness and indifference afterward, their evil appeared so dazzling in contrast with You Qing's goodness. Especially the utterance "Why you have only one son?" reflected and implied the cruel reality of You Qing's death. The official-standard idea of valuing the officials and belittling people inferior has a history of thousands of years in China. Most people have a balance between officials and the people in their hearts. When the two conflict, they unconsciously tend to the former. It can be imagined that if the person waiting for blood donation is also just an ordinary farmer, perhaps the teacher will not organize young students (Grade 5, about 12 years) to donate blood, and a You Qing-style tragedy will not happen at all.

Austin divides speech acts into three different categories: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. Speech acts serve their function once they are said or communicated. These are commonly taken to include acts such as apologizing, promising, ordering, answering, requesting, complaining, warning, inviting, refusing, and congratulating. In the novel, Er Xi is a sincere person. Even though he can't afford a mosquito net for his distressed wife, he made his efforts to ensure the family's happiness. "It's dark and Er Xi lay down on the bed to feed mosquitoes, let Feng Xia sit outside to enjoy the shade, and he offers to feed the mosquitoes in the house. After he felt there is no mosquitos, he would let Feng Xia go to sleep."

Fu Gui: Er Xi, you go and buy a net.

Er Xi: The debt is not paid off; my heart is not at ease. (The debt owed by the grand wedding between Er Xi and Feng Xia)

Fu Gui: Don't be like this.

Er Xi: It doesn't matter to me, it matters to Feng Xia, who is pregnant.

The locutiornay act is saying something. What is said, the form of the words uttered has a meaning. For instance: Fu Gui said, "Er Xi, you go and buy a net." The utterance is a kind of order, it carries its literal meaning. While Er Xi answered, "The debt is not paid off, my heart is not at ease." Here it represents the illocutionary act. In an illocutionary act, there is a purpose and intention of saying. It has a certain force of it. It shows that Er Xi didn't want to buy a net until their wedding debt was paid off. However, the perlocutionary act creates a sense of consequential effects on the audience. The effects may be in the form of thoughts, imaginations, feelings, or emotions. From the conversation, we can infer that Er Xi would rather sacrifice himself to feed mosquitos and he might not buy a mosquito net until his debt is paid off.

3. Conclusion

Yu Hua chose to create this novel *To Live* after being inspired and greatly touched by the American folk ballad "Old Black Joe." Despite his struggles in life and the loss of his family, the elderly black slave continued to look at the world with love and offered no complaints. This modest American slave song is pertinent to the tale of Fu Gui's life, which was full of upheavals and sorrow, but also peace and contentment. The novel *To Live* depicts the struggles of Fu Gui, the son of a rich landowner, as the Chinese Revolution causes and extends historical events that radically alter the character of Chinese society. The story in the novel is told through the eyes of Fu Gui — a squandering son, a shaky husband, a devoted father, and a loving grandfather — who lives to see every one of his family members die, leaving him utterly alone, finally to find a company in an ox that he saves from the butcher's knife and comically names after himself. Fu Gui's pre-revolutionary status as a lazy wealthy idler contrasts sharply with his post-revolutionary identity as a persecuted farmer. For Fu Gui and us common people, the dignity of life is in coping with the vicissitudes of fate. His tragedy is caused by his character and the historical time. He is also representative of common people in the 1930s in China. The novel is successful to reflect the desperate attempt of human survival reflecting the tragic real world through language discourse.

The images of communal living, as well as the influence of the Great Leap Forward on people's lives and the Cultural Revolution, are vivid. They show us how China's political environment has changed. In any literature piece, pragmatics analysis is an important way for studying linguistic conversation based on discourse, context, and function. It will assist students in gaining a better understanding of literary works. By investigating conversational language via three different sorts of speech actions: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts of Austin, the background of the contextual function of language can be revealed. In linguistic discourse, the relevance of words and their meaning are closely linked. The study of pragmatics will aid in determining the implicit and explicit meaning of a linguistic conversation. It gives learners new learning perspectives that help them better grasp literary works.

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