

THE PRAGMATICS OF DRAMA
INTERPRETATION:
A RELEVANCE-THEORETIC
APPROACH TO PINTER'S PLAYS

品特戏剧的关联研究

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宋 杰 著

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序

运用语用理论对戏剧文本进行分析是近20多年来不少语用学研究者想一试身手的领域。在我所指导过的30多名博士研究生中，就有三位作了这方面的研究。他们三人研究的侧重点不一样，所使用的“工具”也不一样。最早的一位作于上世纪90年代的后期，他运用英美学派中一系列的语用概念和理论，如语境理论、言语行为理论、会话合作原则等，对戏剧对话中的会话含义、礼貌现象等进行研究，以发现这些手法对剧中人物性格的刻画所起的作用。第二位作于两三年前，他可说是另辟蹊径，把戏剧文本中常为人忽略的舞台指令定位为自己的研究对象，从语用的视角去发现舞台指令在戏剧的舞台呈现中的重要作用。第三位就是宋杰博士所做的题为《品特戏剧的关联研究》的研究。这三位博士对戏剧所作的语用研究在一定程度上显示出这些年来对戏剧进行语用研究的逐步深入。宋博士的研究有明确的对象——“品特戏剧”，有明确的“工具”——“关联理论”。和初期的研究相比，这无疑是一种进步的表现。

近二三十年变得日趋流行的两大语用理论——关联论和顺应论受到越来越多的语用研究者们的关注。他们中不少人都在尝试把这两大理论用于自己的研究，通过这样的研究，一方面达到解释自己所关注的语言现象的目的，同时也可以证实这两个理论的有效性和解释能力。宋杰的这个研究便是其中一例。正如他本人所述，他的这个研究“旨在考察将关联理论应用于

戏剧文本分析的可行性”。和大多数同类的研究一样，本研究由两大部分构成：理论框架的建构和理论框架的应用。考虑到戏剧的特殊性，宋博士所提出的理论框架包含三个层面，即语言层面、视觉层面和超语言层面。进而在这三个层面对品特的两个剧本《生日晚会》和《回家》进行分析，以发现关联这个认知基础在人物的推理过程中所起的引导作用。

和绝大多数的研究者一样，宋博士把自己提出的理论框架称之为“尝试性”的。这表现出作者的谦虚和客观。实际上在一个理论框架的合理性和有效性得到足够充分的验证之前，它只能被称为是“尝试性”的。提出一个框架，哪怕只是尝试性的，也需要经过严肃的学术思考和不小的学术胆识。但任何一个人提出一个新的框架就好比在为后人在学术研究的崎岖道路上铺下一块垫脚石，哪怕只是一块小小的垫脚石，供后人踩踏，方便他们一步步迈向更高的学术目标。宋杰通过对品特两个剧本的分析，证明了他所提出的框架的合理性和可操作性，为他人提供了一个对戏剧文本进行语用分析的样板。这是他这部专著的学术价值所在。

学术的道路曲折而漫长。戏剧文本的语用研究迄今为止我认为还处于一个探索阶段，还没有出现广泛为人接受的、具有较大影响力的理论框架。对于有志在这个领域从事研究的人，包括宋杰，前面还有很长的路要走。希望他们能坚持走下去，占领更高的学术峰地。

何兆熊

2008年2月

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内容提要

本书旨在考察将关联理论应用于戏剧文本分析的可行性。这项研究主要包括两部分，其一为从关联理论角度建构戏剧阐释的框架，其二是将这一理论框架用于对哈罗德·品特剧本的分析。

书中首先回顾了前人对于关联理论的研究成果以及将这一理论应用于话语分析方面的实例，然后在借鉴这些研究成果的基础上，提出了一个从关联论角度进行文本分析的框架，其中涉及的因素除关联性以外可分为三个层面，即语言层面、视觉层面和超语言层面。在这三个层面的要素中，语言层面（包括其中涉及的各种因素）构成了文本分析的主要对象，而推理则是获取意义的主要手段。由于交际双方对话语的解读都不可避免地涉及到关联这一理念，于是关联成为统辖推理的原则。在推理过程中，从语义、句法、语音等各个方面提取的特点对推理起引导作用，同时借助百科知识及语境提示得出的假设在必要时成为调整推理路径的辅助性手段。按常理，解读者在交际过程中处理以上因素并理解意义时常采用整合手法。为了说明这一框架的合理性以及可操作性，我们用它来分析品特的两个剧本：《生日晚会》和《回家》。

本项研究发现：1) 将戏剧阐释视为带着关联期待不断推理、更新语境假设的过程，不失为一种合理的尝试；2) 随着推理的不断深入，小到语义、句法、语音，大到文本，从各个层面读取的特点都成为推理的提示及向导；3) 通过筛选潜在的隐含意义，我们最初的理解得以加强、充实，或因受到质疑而改变；4) 随着认知语境中储备的信息不断增加，我们解读的关联程度越来越高，剧作家构思安排的意图也因此渐渐得以明示。

关键词：关联；戏剧阐释；推理；品特戏剧

Abstract

This book is intended to explore the possibility of applying the relevance theory (RT) to the analysis of drama texts, aiming to test the feasibility of this application. The study mainly consists of two parts: the establishment of an RT-framework for drama interpretation and its application to the analysis of Harold Pinter's plays.

In preparation for the interpretive framework to be developed, a review of the previous studies on RT and its recent application to discourse analysis is presented. Then in view of these previous accounts, a tentative relevance-theoretic framework for dramatic textual analysis is proposed, which consists of three levels of factors, namely, linguistic level, visual level and supralinguistic level, in addition to the notion of relevance. The three levels, the more specific elements that form each of them, and the relationships that hold between them are discussed in detail. Among the three levels of factors that constitute the framework, linguistic level, with all the elements therein, forms the basic core of the target text to be approached. Inference serves as the overall means to the end of exploring meaning and relevance acts as the governing principle of the inferential process, as the search for relevance underlies the interpretation of the utterances made by both the communicator and the addressee. During the process of inference, the features gathered in terms of semantics, syntax, phonology and the whole text will serve as signposts for reasoning. Last but not least, the assumptions

from the encyclopedic knowledge and context will be the auxiliary tools that constantly adjust the direction of reasoning when called for. To sum up, an integrated approach is required when an interpreter is tackling these factors for the purpose of acquiring the meaning to be communicated. To test the validity and applicability of the framework, we adopt it in the interpretation of two plays by Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming*.

The major findings of the present study are as follows: 1) it is justifiable to view drama interpretation as a process of continuously reasoning out and renewing contextual assumptions, with the expectation of relevance incorporated in the construal; 2) while the inference for the intended meaning proceeds, the features observed in semantics, syntax, phonology and the whole text will serve as cues to suggest the appropriate path of reasoning; 3) through the screening of potential implications, our incipient understanding is reinforced, enriched, or contradicted by the subsequent assumptions; 4) with more and more information introduced into the cognitive environment, a more relevant interpretation is gradually obtained, making manifest to us the possible intentions underlying the playwright's maneuver.

Key words: relevance; drama interpretation; inference; Pinter's plays

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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Preliminary remarks

The past two decades has witnessed a fast development in the relevance theory (RT henceforth), originally advanced to expound the cognitive and biological basis of communication. Many scholars and researchers have either argued for or challenged the value of this theory, adding to the impetus for its progress. The theory has been applied to the analysis and explanation of various language phenomena, in the hope of exploring the role of relevance in the universal language processing. The present study is intended to explore the possibility of applying RT to the analysis of drama texts, aiming to test its feasibility and, if possible, to widen its scope of application.

1.2 Rationale of the present study

Approaching drama texts from the RT perspective is of both theoretical significance and practical feasibility for reasons as follows:

Firstly, relevance underlies almost every event of human communication. Centering around the relationship between effort and effect, this concept counts as a universal feature shared by each and every process of language exchange, with the interpretation of drama texts included.

Secondly, the continuous construction and renewal of context-

al assumptions in language understanding as held by RT seems to echo the open-ended activity of dramatic textual analysis, whose target is highly elusive and demanding in terms of processing. Therefore, it is worthwhile to probe into the connection between the ubiquitous feature of human cognition and the interpretation of literary texts.

Thirdly, the present study has its theoretical value in that it views drama texts from a new perspective, foreboding the potential of combining literary research with pragmatic analysis in a new way. Moreover, such a study will inevitably provide some insights into the study in other related areas, like that of discourse analysis and human communication.

1.3 Objectives and methodology

The initial effort of the present study is to develop a workable framework from the perspective of RT, which may be applied to the interpretation of drama texts. Based on the framework, we can more readily identify the specific features that may provide appropriate guidance, when needed, in our analysis of the plays. The objectives of the present study are: 1) to locate the levels on which interpretation is to be made as well as the specific variables within each of them; 2) to make a tentative analysis of drama texts within the proposed framework; and 3) to explore the underlying relationship between the stylistic features of drama texts and the inferential attempts involved in the reading process.

To achieve these goals, I mainly employ the method of qualitative analysis, either when reviewing the previous literature and shaping the framework for study or when interpreting the drama texts. The data used for analysis are cited from the texts of two plays

written by Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party* and *The Homecoming*. It is justifiable to assume that the research findings may have a high applicability in terms of other discourses, owing to the universality of the features delimited in the framework of interpretation.

1.4 Outline of the book

This book is composed of six chapters.

Chapter 1 presents a general introduction to the whole project, including the rationale and objectives of the current study, the methodology adopted, and a description of the target data.

Chapter 2 conducts a brief survey of the related literature on RT as well as its recent applications to discourse analysis.

Chapter 3 explores a number of notions and features worthy of attention when applying RT to discourse analysis, touching upon the interrelationship between them and their working in practical interpretation.

Chapter 4 and 5 illustrate the way those features find their textual realization in the two plays of Harold Pinter, the way they influence the actual reading, and the way we reach a relevant interpretation of the drama texts.

In Chapter 6, a summary is provided of the major findings of the present study. Meanwhile, limitations of this study and implications for further development in this area are also pointed out.

Chapter 2 A Review of Previous Literature on Relevance Theory

2.1 Rudiments of relevance theory

2.1.1 Relevance theory and human communication

The Relevance Theory initiated and developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) and Blakemore (1987, 1992) is an attempt to reduce a very complex set of phenomena having to do with communication and interpretation to a very constrained set of explanatory, cognitive notions. As commented by Dor (2003: 699), the theory in its essence is one of cognitive cost-effectiveness; it claims that human cognitive processes are geared to achieving the greatest possible cognitive effect for the least processing effort. This meta-principle is incarnated in Sperber and Wilson's technical notion of relevance. According to Ramos (2003: 1308), RT hinges on four basic assumptions:

- (a) every utterance has a variety of interpretations, all compatible with the information that is linguistically encoded;
- (b) not all these interpretations occur to the hearer simultaneously; some of them take more effort to think up;
- (c) hearers are equipped with a single general criterion for evaluating interpretations;
- (d) this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but a single

interpretation, so that having found an interpretation that fits the criterion, the hearer looks no further.

The general objective of RT is to “identify underlying mechanisms, rooted in human psychology, which explain how humans communicate with one another” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995: 32). The addressee’s task in a communicative event is to build up an interpretive hypothesis about the communicator’s intention when he produces a stimulus. The communicator will try to measure up the implications of his stimuli so that the interpretation intended is finally selected by the addressee. This provides a picture of the sender communicating stimuli with degrees of plausible interpretations, and the task of the audience lies in trying to select the correct interpretation (that is, the correct balance of effects/effort) in the continuum of possible interpretations in a context. The addressee’s inferential task is a difficult one because hearers are often presented with signals which are mostly unpredictable; moreover, the signals often arrive in a noisy environment and are frequently subject to considerable distortion and attenuation. As formulated by Wilson (1994: 47),

“... utterance interpretation is not a simple matter of decoding, but a fallible process of hypothesis formation and evaluation, there is no guarantee that the interpretation that satisfies the hearer’s expectation of relevance will be correct, i. e. the intended one. Because of mismatches in memory and perceptual systems, the hearer may overlook a hypothesis that the speaker thought would be highly salient, or notice a hypothesis that the speaker had overlooked. Misunderstandings occur. The aim of a theory of