

A Study on the Pragmatic Functions of Discourse Marker You Know in The Big Bang Theory

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Abstract: Discourse markers play an important role in daily communication and help to guide interlocutors to achieve optimal relevance when interpreting utterances. Academic research on discourse markers mainly focuses on coherence theory, syntactic-pragmatic theory, and relevance theory, paying attention to their meaning, function, and classification. However, few researches have studied on *you know* as a discourse marker. Therefore, this paper, based on relevance theory, intends to analyze the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *you know* in the American TV drama *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5). Findings show that *you know* can be used as a marker to supervise turn-shifting, further-elaborate, remind, mitigate face-threatening act and show hesitation, thus ensuring the smooth progress of communication. Findings of these functions are significant to help people express their intentions more clearly in interpersonal communication as well as to the studies of pragmatics from the perspective of relevance theory.

1. Introduction

Discourse markers refer to words or phrases used to indicate various logical or spatiotemporal relationships between utterances,^[1] they can provide important clues to the listener, thus helping the interlocutors to explain the intention of the other more easily in the process of communication and successfully achieve the purpose of communication. Recent research by linguists on discourse markers has mainly focused on three theoretical perspectives: The coherence approach represented by Deborah Schiffrin, the syntactic-pragmatic approach represented by Bruce Fraser, and the cognitive-pragmatic approach represented by Diane Blakemore based on the framework of relevance theory.^[2] More and more scholars believe that in discourse, the function of discourse markers is primarily pragmatic rather than semantic or syntactic. Therefore, more studies about discourse markers have shifted from semantics and syntax to pragmatics and cognition. However, there has been limited systematic analysis of the discourse marker *you know*, particularly within the data of *The Big Bang Theory*, which has gained worldwide popularity. Therefore, under the framework of relevance theory, this study aims to identify various pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *you know* in *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Relevance theory

Relevance theory was formally proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in their book *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* in 1986. Relevance theory is based on two principles: the cognitive principle of relevance and the communicative principle of relevance. The cognitive principle of relevance claims that human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance. They argue that the principal function of language is communication, and they regard communication as an ostensive-inferential process. That is, communication is not simply a matter of encoding and decoding, but it also involves inference on the part of the hearer and ostension on the part of the speaker. Based on this, the communicative principle of relevance holds the view that every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its optimal relevance. The presumption of optimal relevance holds that every ostensive communication act has the optimal relevance itself, and the degree of relevance depends on two factors: the cognitive effect and the processing effort. According to relevance theory, other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the greater its relevance will be. However, other things being equal, the greater the processing effort required, the less relevant the input will be.^[3]

In order to enable the hearer to understand the meaning of the discourse as easily as possible, while expressing the discourse information as clearly as possible, the speaker will use various linguistic means to emphasize or highlight the explicit part, such as the timely use of discourse markers, to help the hearer infer the suggestive signals and restrict the hearer's understanding of discourse relevance.^[4] That is, when people understand utterances, they will seek the connection between the new information and the contextual assumptions. In the process of communication, people should strive to find relevance, construct context and make inferential processing, so as to achieve optimal relevance.

2.2. Previous Studies of Discourse Markers

The widespread occurrence of discourse markers has caught the attention of linguists worldwide, leading to substantial achievements in their research. As early as the 1950s, linguists have begun the study of discourse markers. Since then, studies on discourse markers have emerged one after another, which can be reviewed from three theoretical perspectives: Firstly, The discourse-coherence perspective represented by Deborah Schiffrin, it discusses the realization of discourse coherence from the perspective of semantics.^[5] Secondly, the syntactic-pragmatic perspective represented by Bruce Fraser, which emphasizes syntactic features and grammatical distribution.^[6] Thirdly, the cognitive-pragmatic perspective represented by Diane Blakemore based on the framework of relevance theory. She points out that discourse markers are independent of conceptual meaning, but they have procedural meaning, indicating how to manipulate the conceptual representation of discourse. Therefore, she contends that by using discourse markers, the speaker tries to reduce the cognitive effort of the listener, while the listener tries to estimate the means by which relevance is realized.^[7]

The research on discourse markers in China began in the 1980s, with initial focus on Chinese discourse markers. But later, a growing number of scholars began investigating discourse markers from various perspectives, making great contributions to its development. Among them, the main scholars include Liao Qiuzhong, Ran Yongping, and Feng Guangwu. Liao defined discourse markers as “discourse connectives” and classified Chinese pragmatic markers based on two criteria: function and position.^[8] Ran provided an overview of the research status of discourse markers,^[9] while Feng introduced pragmatic markers^[10] and elucidated the semantic/pragmatic interface

through them.^[11]

This part briefly reviews the research on discourse markers by some major scholars at home and abroad. The first two methods are limited to the language itself and have not explore cognitive and psychological factors. While the method of relevance theory analyzes discourse markers based on the psychology of the speakers, aiming to find out how to apply them to discourse and limit the interpretation of discourse, so as to promote successful communication. Since the framework of relevance theory is of great significance and enlightenment to the study of speech communication, the author believes that it is more effective and appropriate to study discourse markers from the perspective of relevance theory. Meanwhile, few people have carried out detailed studies on the single discourse marker *you know*. In order to fill this gap, this paper will analyze the pragmatic functions of *you know* based on relevance theory in American TV series *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5). Specifically, the study addresses the following two research questions:

1) What are the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *you know* used by interlocutors in *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5)?

2) How does the discourse marker *you know* help to facilitate communication?

3. Data and Methodology

The Big Bang Theory (Season 5) is chosen as the data source due to the nature of its language and the richness of its scenes. Since the discourse marker *you know* usually appears in spoken language, it is better to choose more everyday language to study the pragmatic functions of *you know*. On the other hand, Season 5 of *The Big Bang Theory* has not been studied as the data source, which can ensure the originality of this paper.

In the beginning, the script of *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5) was downloaded, and was carefully checked to ensure that the downloaded script is the same as the original play. The fifth season of *The Big Bang Theory* contains 24 episodes. The transcripts of the drama generates a corpus of 64258 words, with a total of 133 *you knows* identified.

This paper primarily employs qualitative research method, using discourse analysis to interpret dialogue scenes and speakers' intentions in the fifth season of *The Big Bang Theory*, aiming to investigate the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *you know*, and explore how its various pragmatic functions can facilitate communication.

4. A Functional Study of *You Know* in *The Big Bang Theory*

4.1. Brief Introduction to *The Big Bang Theory*

The Big Bang Theory is a television comedy produced by CBS (Colombia Broadcasting System), which enjoys great popularity all over the world. So far, *The Big Bang Theory* has been nominated for 216 different awards, winning 56 times, including 52 nominations for Emmy Awards and 10 wins. It mainly tells the story between Sheldon Cooper and Leonard Hofstadter, two highly intelligent physicists at the California Institute of Technology, and their neighbor Penny, a beautiful girl who dreams of becoming an actress but works in a cheese cake factory. Four other supporting characters are Howard, Rajesh, Bernadette and Amy, who are the protagonists' friends.

4.2. Pragmatic Functions of *You Know* in *The Big Bang Theory*

A total of 133 uses of *you know* are identified in *The Big Bang Theory* (Season 5). Among them, 83 (62.4%) are used pragmatically, and the remaining 50 (37.6%) are used as content words. It confirm that native English-speakers mainly use the discourse marker *you know* pragmatically. The

following part presents and discusses the pragmatic functions of *you know* in the fifth season of *The Big Bang Theory* in detail based on the relevance theory.

4.2.1. Turn-shifting

Turn-shifting refers to the process of switching speakers during a conversation. One of the characteristics of discourse communication is that participants take turns speaking in conversation.^[12] Speakers often use the discourse marker *you know* to start to control the turn and strive for the speaking right, with the purpose of indicating to the listener that they have something to say. When *you know* has this function, it is mostly located at the beginning of the utterance, as shown in Excerpt 1 below:

Excerpt 1. using *you know* as a turn-shifting marker

- 1) Leonard: What are you doing?
- 2) Sheldon: I'm trying to get the hair out of my eyes.
- 3) Leonard: Sheldon, you are one day late for your haircut.
- 4) Sheldon: Thank you for captioning my nightmare.
- 5) Leonard: Will you stop that?
- 6) Sheldon: I can't help it, I feel like a teen heartthrob.
- 7) Penny: ***You know***, Sheldon, I used to cut my brother's hair. I could do it for you.
(From season five, the 18th episode)

In line 7, Penny uses the discourse marker *you know* to start her turn, transferring the speaking right to herself and propose that she can help Sheldon cut his hair. For the listener Sheldon, he should pay attention to the upcoming information of Penny signaled by this marker, and pay extra processing efforts to obtain the optimally relevant information.

4.2.2. Further-elaborating

Further-elaborating refers to the act of providing additional explanation or clarification on previous utterances. In everyday conversation, speakers often strive to ensure their intentions are clear to the listener. However, due to time constraints or expression ability, they may initially fail to provide a complete explanation. In such cases, speakers may use discourse marker *you know* to signal their intention to supplement or further explain their previous statement, making it easier for the listener to understand without needing to ask questions. It's important for listeners to pay attention to these cues and follow the speaker's guidance to achieve the best relevance with minimal effort, as shown in Excerpt 2 below:

Excerpt 2. using *you know* as a further-elaborating marker

- 1) Penny: Nice to see you. Um, can we talk to you about Raj?
- 2) Howard: She says, "Sure, what about him?"
- 3) Penny: Okay, um, gosh, how do I start?Um. see, Raj is kind of naive. I mean, he hasn't dated a whole lot of women. And I'm concerned that without meaning to, you might be taking advantage of him. ***You know***, by letting him buy you a bunch of expensive things.
(From season five, the 4th episode)

In line 3, the speaker (Penny) uses the phrase "take advantage of him", but finds that such expression may not be accurate, and may make the listener (Emily) misunderstand. Therefore, Penny uses the discourse marker *you know* to elicit her next explanation, specifically explaining how Emily uses Raj, so that the listener can make a correct interpretation.

4.2.3. Reminding

Reminding refers to the act of prompting another interlocutor with information that has been

forgotten or overlooked. In communication, one communicating party may forget or fail to notice certain information, and the other party needs to clearly say the information as a reminder. At this point, the speaker can use the discourse marker *you know* to highlight the specific information needing attention, prompting the listener to connect it with the previous conversation and better understand the speaker's intention, as shown in Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3. using *you know* as a reminding marker

- 1) Penny: Well, I'm going to take myself out to a movie tonight. You want to go?
- 2) Leonard: Really? Do we do that?
- 3) Penny: What do you mean?
- 4) Leonard: ***You know***, we haven't spent time alone together since we broke up.
(From season five, the 9th episode)

In Excerpt 3, Penny invites Leonard to see a movie, but they haven't hung out alone since they broke up. Therefore, the speaker Leonard uses *you know* to elicit this information as a reminder in case Penny forgets this fact.

4.2.4. Face-threatening Mitigating

Face-threatening mitigating refers to the act taken to reduce the potential threat to another interlocutor's face caused by a message or an action. In the study of linguistics, face is a person's public self-image, the social and emotional sense of self that everyone has and expects others to recognize.^[13] In verbal communication, it is crucial for both the speaker and hearer to maintain positive interpersonal relations and politeness. However, situations like disagreements or refusal of requests can arise, which may pose a threat to the interlocutors' face, and this kind of behavior is called face-threatening act. In such instances, people can employ linguistic devices, including the discourse marker *you know*, to mitigate the threat to face and manage interpersonal relationships effectively, as shown in Excerpt 4 below:

Excerpt 4. using *you know* as a face-threatening mitigating marker

- 1) Penny: My God, Amy s that's really crappy of you.
- 2) Amy: It is?
- 3) Penny: Yeah! Letting Sheldon use you to manipulate me? I thought you were my friend.
- 4) Amy: No, I am your friend. Please don't be mad at me.
- 5) Penny: I can't even believe this. ***You know***, maybe you should just go.
- 6) Amy: No! No, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I take it all back!
(From season five, the 2nd episode)

In Excerpt 4, the speaker Penny is angry because Amy tries to manipulate her behavior, so she wants Amy to leave. This behavior threatens Amy's face of being accepted and liked. But since they are close friends, Penny uses *you know* to soften the threat to Amy's face. Amy, the listener, should realize that Penny doesn't actually want her to leave but is speaking out of anger, and make the judgment that is most relevant to Penny's real intention.

4.2.5. Hesitating

Hesitating means to pause or hold back before saying or doing something often due to uncertainty, indecision or reluctance. There may be pauses in conversation, that is, the speaker is not prepared with the appropriate expression. Before that, the speaker can use the discourse marker *you know* to show hesitation or delay, to fill in the time for thinking and buy more time for organizing the following. This can not only avoid the abruptness and awkwardness caused by the pause, but also serve as a signal to the listener that there is something to follow, just not ready yet. At the same time, the listener should recognize these cues of hesitation indicated by the discourse

marker *you know* and wait patiently for the relevant utterance to be said later. The hesitating marker is usually in the middle of the discourse, as shown in Excerpt 5 below:

Excerpt 5. using *you know* as a hesitating marker

1) Amy: I wanted to get you something you didn't have.

2) Penny: Wow! I... I don't know what to... Wow.

3) Amy: Do you like it?

4) Penny: Do I like it? Wow.

5) Amy: So, uh, where are you gonna hang it?

6) Penny: Oh, my God. Hang it. Wow. Um, ***you know***, I'd have to go get a hook and nails and a hammer and...

7) Amy: No problem.

8) Penny: Oh, look. You got... You just... you got it all right there. Wow.

(From season five, the 17th episode)

In Excerpt 5, Amy sends Penny a large picture, but the picture of Penny is not good-looking, so she does not like the gift, making her unknown to respond to Amy's suggestion to hang it up for a moment, so she uses discourse marker *you know* to offer her more time to come up with a suitable excuse to decline Amy's request, as well as to fill the time gap. For the listener, Amy needs to realize that although the speaker pauses, the connected discourse after *you know* is still related to the previous one, and needs to continue to pay efforts to infer Penny's intention and implicature.

5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the pragmatic functions of the discourse marker *you know* from the perspective of relevance theory. Findings have revealed five pragmatic functions of *you know* as a discourse marker, playing a role to facilitate the development of communication. The five pragmatic functions include: turn-shifting, which can help the speaker to bid the floor; further-elaborating, which can elicit more explanation to make the hearer better understand the speaker's intention; reminding, which can remind the hearer of some missing information; face-threatening mitigating, which can minimize the possible threat to the interlocutor's face; hesitating, which can show hesitation and buy more time for the speaker to think. Therefore, the discourse marker *you know* can influence and guide hearer's understanding of discourse, so that hearer can make less processing effort to obtain greater cognitive effect and achieve optimal relevance, which ensures smooth communication. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of language communication, while also aiding English learners in more accurately understanding and using discourse markers, thereby enhancing their communicative competence.

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