

Original Paper

The Art of "Implication Beyond Words" in Chinese Language

Hanshu Zou¹

¹ Renmin University of China, Beijing, 100872, China

Received: November 11, 2024 Accepted: December 17, 2024 Online Published: January 01, 2025

doi:10.22158/assc.v6n6p103

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v6n6p103>

1. The Implication Beyond Words in Chinese

It is widely acknowledged that throughout their independent development, various ethnic groups around the world have created languages and scripts that serve all members of their societies, as well as political rituals and customs distinct from other ethnicities. Compared to other ethnic groups, particularly Western ones, the Han Chinese ethnic group has a psychological structure that is distinctly reserved, the reason behind it is uncertain.

However, one thing is certain: Confucianism has played a significant role in shaping this trait. The renowned thinker Li Zehou, living in the United States, has pointed out that Chinese people, especially the Han ethnic group, "due to the practical rationality that often restrains, guides, and self-regulates emotional expression, so-called 'regulating emotions with reason,' 'arising from emotions and stopping at propriety,' this also makes Chinese people's emotions in life and art often in a state of self-suppression."

Because of this, the psychological structure of the Han Chinese, when compared to the frank, straightforward, and humorous characteristics of other ethnic groups, especially Westerners, "is distinctly characterized by implicitness and depth." This trait is most vividly displayed in language expression.

Implications is commonly used in Chinese art creation, referring to the intentional omission in calligraphy and painting to enhance the harmony and beauty of the entire work, leaving room for imagination. Rooted in the reserved and implicit Chinese culture, the Chinese language, influenced by this reserved cultural psychology, also possesses the artistic charm of "words exhausted but meaning infinite," which manifests as the "implication beyond words" we often speak of.

"Implication beyond words" is a ubiquitous linguistic phenomenon in Chinese expression and reception and has always been a widely concerned rhetorical phenomenon. This art of implication beyond words is not only present in literary and artistic works but also permeates every aspect of our lives.

For example, romantic love is a common human sentiment. Western men and women, if mutually delighted, not only behave openly but also express their feelings directly. They say "I love you," which

is roughly equivalent to how Chinese casually greet each other with "Have you eaten?" However, even if Han Chinese spend a lifetime together, with children and grandchildren filling the house, it is still difficult for us to utter the words "I love you." Thus, there is a Chinese saying, "Love is in the heart but hard to speak."

Because reserve and introversion are common national characteristics of Chinese people, especially the Han ethnic group, China has always valued the literary tradition of "not writing a single word, yet capturing the charm." This tradition is present not only in literary works but also in daily life.

In real life, whether speaking or writing, people consciously or unconsciously pursue the effect of "implying more than what is said." If this literary tradition is met and this effect is achieved, it is considered good, appreciated, and even becomes a fine tale. On the contrary, straightforward expression without any reserve is often not recognized. If it involves sensitive topics and the expression is too direct and lacks subtlety, it will not only be rejected by the direct recipient but also criticized by indirect recipients as "inappropriate speech."

For example, if both parties violate the cooperative principle in daily communication, and one party expresses an unwillingness to cooperate, they may deliberately tell lies or baseless statements to indirectly express their resistance.

2. The Motivation Behind Implication Beyond Words

When humans cognize things, it is often a process from concrete to abstract, from simple to complex, and from appearance to essence. Implication beyond words is a linguistic phenomenon formed by using language in communication and combining context to express one thing but mean another. As a linguistic phenomenon, while analyzing the construction and understanding of implication beyond words, we also attempt to reveal the motivations behind its formation. What factors prompt people to use certain linguistic forms to express implications in verbal communication?

There are many motivations for the emergence of implication beyond words, mainly including politeness and face-saving, self-protection, the psychology of wisdom, aesthetic needs, and the inherent nature of language itself.

From the perspective of politeness and face-saving, as social beings, people have face issue in verbal communication. Sometimes, to preserve one's own face or to maintain the face of others, one has to speak indirectly. If spoken directly, it would hurt the face, or others' dignity. Politeness is essentially a linguistic strategy, and saving face is the true goal.

Speakers may not be clear for various reasons, such as using a more euphemistic method of speaking out of politeness and self-protection in specific situations (van Dijk, 1987). When people say something they know lacks factual basis, to avoid taking responsibility for their words, they often adopt a more veiled expression, allowing the listener to experience, understand, and even guess. If it is later proven that they were wrong, because they were very euphemistic at the time and did not directly state their attitude, they can also find excuses to deny it, thus avoiding responsibility for their words.

From the psychology of wisdom, words containing implications are not directly expressing intentions but using a circuitous way to mean something else. Sometimes communication is a state of struggle, where both parties use wisdom to mobilize their words and engage in a battle of wits. Words with implications can express more meaning with certain linguistic forms, which require more intelligence and verbal skills to achieve. People's admiration for wisdom makes them actively use intelligence in communication to seek expressions with greater communicative effects.

From the perspective of aesthetic needs, discourse information can be divided into rational information, potential information, aesthetic information, and stylistic information. Potential information is the actual information conveyed by the speaker, implicitly contained within rational information. The expression of potential information can make the meaning of discourse implicit and not overtly revealed. From the perspective of information rhetoric, implication beyond words belongs to potential information, which is the meaning obtained by discourse in connection with context. Implication beyond words has a high rhetorical value in verbal communication.

It conveys communicative intentions indirectly, making the meaning of discourse implicit, leaving face and room for the other party, and is more acceptable in verbal communication. Some forms of implication beyond words are witty and humorous, which can serve as a lubricant in interpersonal relationships in certain situations. It gives people a sense of irony and humor without causing offense. Implication beyond words often conveys richer discourse information with less language, thus achieving greater discourse efficiency.

In terms of the inherent qualities of language, the symbols of language are limited, the structure is limited, and the rules are limited. Using limited forms and structures to express rich content is a requirement of the nature of language symbols themselves. With limited words but infinite meaning, the nature of language symbols creates good conditions for speakers to convey communicative intentions with implications and is also demanded by the nature of language symbols themselves.

If we cannot fully utilize limited forms and structures, it will lead to cumbersome use of language symbols, affecting the function of language. The expression of implication beyond words conforms to the principle of linguistic economy, using fewer language symbols to express richer content.

Ultimately, the strong vitality of the rhetorical phenomenon of "implication beyond words" is rooted in the profound influence of cultural psychology. Specifically, it is closely related to the psychology of euphemism and imagery thinking.

Firstly, the phenomenon of "implication beyond words" is related to the advocacy of euphemistic psychology. Euphemistic psychology is a psychological characteristic that people do not like to state things directly and is a universally existing cultural psychology. Its emergence is related to social aesthetic psychology and related social customs, especially taboos.

Taboos are "a universally existing cultural psychological phenomenon in human society," related to people's superstitions and fears. This induces people's euphemistic psychology when using language, especially noticeable when speaking of "unmentionable" phenomena such as birth, aging, sickness, and

death, and physiological phenomena. In addition, the emergence of euphemistic psychology is also related to human aesthetic pursuits—"the beauty of distance."

Regarding the theory of "distance," German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and British modern famous psychologist Edward Bullough (1880-1934) have both made relevant discussions. Schopenhauer once pointed out in the fable of "a group of porcupines huddled together for winter" that there should be an appropriate distance between people. Following Schopenhauer, Bullough proposed the famous "psychological distance theory," believing that "psychological distance" is "a fundamental principle for creating and appreciating beauty." The pursuit of "the beauty of distance" leads people to form euphemistic psychology when facing some "inconvenient to state directly" phenomena.

3. How to Understand Implications Beyond Words

In verbal communication, implications beyond words are ubiquitous. To correctly understand implications beyond words, it is necessary not only to start from words and sentences but also to grasp the social background and common sense experience of the speaker and the receiver, and a series of contexts, and to choose the best context effect suitable for the speaker's information from these words, thereby deducing the meaning of the words.

Firstly, understand implications beyond words from the words and sentences themselves.

In our language habits, some words and sentences themselves have another layer of meaning. For example, "Please close the door" implies that "the door is open." Most rhetorical questions and interrogative sentences also have implications beyond their surface meaning, such as "Can't you do it?" The implication is that "you" cannot do this job, "Do you have a cigarette?" Although the sentence is a question, the speaker's main purpose is not to ask a question but to imply "Please give me a cigarette."

Secondly, understand implications beyond words in context.

Words and sentences themselves have implications beyond their surface meaning, which can be understood directly from the words themselves. However, some words do not have this characteristic and require us to rely on a certain context to truly understand the implications within the words. This context mainly includes social context, communicator context, and experience and habit context.

3.1 Social Context

It mainly refers to the social and historical background. Every era will have some things that cannot be said directly, should not be said directly, should not be said, or dare not be said. When it is necessary to convey such words, and it is unavoidable, words with implications beyond their surface meaning appear.

For example:

A: Are we inviting Master Zhang to dinner tonight?

B (with a hint of embarrassment): Master Zhang just returned from Beijing.

A: That's a perfect opportunity to give him a welcome feast!

It is common to give a welcome feast for friends returning from afar. The reason why B emphasizes

"just returned from Beijing" with embarrassment is due to a specific social context. At that time, it was the period of SARS, and Beijing was the epicenter of the epidemic. Thus, B's implication is reasonable — fearing that Master Zhang might have contracted SARS and inviting him to dinner could lead to infection. A did not closely connect with the social background at the time to understand B's words, leading to a biased understanding of B's speech.

Another example from articles in the 1970s and 1980s: "When I was in the farm, a young instructor wrote to me, expressing that meaning," "After much consideration, this thing came too early for me, and it is useless." The implications of "that meaning" and "this thing" refer to marriage and love affairs. People in the 1970s and 1980s were more conservative about love and reluctant to speak openly, usually using such implications to express themselves. If such words were placed in the present, they would certainly be confusing. But at that time, people could easily understand when they heard these words.

These implications, if not lived in the era and background, and without understanding the society in which the language is situated, are difficult to appreciate. Therefore, to correctly understand the meaning in the other party's words, we must have a full understanding of the social context of the words.

3.2 Communicator Context

"Verbal communication is a process of manifestation and inference". Manifestation is for the speaker, referring to the act of the speaker explicitly expressing their intentions to the listener; inference is for the listener, referring to the act of the listener processing the speaker's message, selecting cognitive context, and deducing the speaker's intentions. In this process of manifestation and inference, after the speaker sends a message, the listener must use their thinking patterns, personal experiences, professional cultivation, and cultural background to process the speaker's words and select the best context effect suitable for the speaker's information from the words, thereby deducing the meaning of the words.

Starting from the speaker, because the expression of implications beyond words is primarily the speaker's intention to hide their true intentions in verbal communication for a certain purpose, that is, not explicitly expressing their intentions to the listener, which requires us to look for and supplement the "unexpected" content in the speaker's "words" from the speaker's psychological situation and background.

An example from "Dream of the Red Chamber": When Zi Juan ordered the little maid Xue Yan to bring her a small hand stove, Dai Yu asked with a smile, "Who asked you to bring it? It's hard for him to care so much; I'm not cold enough to die!" Xue Yan replied, "Sister Zi Juan is afraid that the young lady is cold and asked me to bring it." Dai Yu said such a sentence. On the surface, it was said to Xue Yan, but Xue Yan did not understand the context of Dai Yu's words and did not hear her implication. Bao Yu, who grew up playing with Dai Yu, understood Dai Yu's meaning well: "You (Xue Yan) only follow her (Zi Juan) words" actually means "You (Bao Yu) only follow her (Baochai) words." Dai Yu cleverly

used the implication to express her jealousy and subtly conveyed her dissatisfaction to Bao Yu. Others may not understand, but Bao Yu, who is familiar with Dai Yu's character, knew she was mocking him and laughed twice.

Therefore, in the process of verbal communication, the speaker focuses on their own context and rarely considers the listener's context. The listener, when interpreting the speaker's words, often unconsciously relies on their own context to interpret others' words, attributing things that are not there and overinterpreting the speaker's original intentions, which is sensitive and leads to "the speaker has no intention, but the listener is intentional."

4. Context of Experience and Common Sense

Understanding implications beyond words requires not only social context and the context of both communicators but also the context of experience and common sense.

For example:

A: "Let's go to the tavern for a drink!"

B: "My stomach has been hurting lately."

B indirectly refuses A's invitation, not directly saying no to drinking, but using the context of "stomach pain" to decline the invitation: alcohol is irritating, and drinking can exacerbate stomach pain. Because both A and B have this kind of experience and common sense, they can communicate smoothly. If A does not have this kind of knowledge and experience, it is difficult to infer B's implicit refusal to the invitation.

Therefore, to understand the implications in daily language and accurately comprehend the implications in language, a certain amount of life common sense and background knowledge are indispensable.

5. Conclusion

As the saying goes, "Books cannot exhaust words, and words cannot exhaust meaning." Implication beyond words is an interesting linguistic phenomenon and "empty space" art in Chinese. This linguistic technique holds an important position in both literary creation and daily life. A thought-provoking sentence, a good novel, a good poem often conveys endless meanings within limited words, which requires us to combine context to slowly experience and savor.

References

- Chen, L. (2015). An Inquiry into the Rationale of "Implication Beyond Words". *Journal of Chuxiong Normal University*, 30(5), 50-53.
- Chen, L. (2016). *A Study on the Rhetorical Phenomenon of "Implication Beyond Words"*. China Social Sciences Publishing House: Beijing.
- Li, N. (2015). A Brief Analysis of Implication Beyond Words in Daily Verbal Communication. *Journal*

- of Hubei University of Science and Technology*, 35(3), 165-166.
- Lv, S. (2013). A Brief Analysis of Implication Beyond Words and Its Derivation. *Wenli Navigation*, 8, 32-33.
- Sun, H. (2018). A Pragmatic Analysis of Implication Beyond Words. *Friend of Humanities*, 9, 22-23.
- Tang, Q. (2014). The Theory of "Implication Beyond Words" in Pragmatics and the "Mood" Theory in Literature. *Guizhou Social Sciences*, 12, 74-79.
- Wang, R. (2019). Discussing "Implication Beyond Words" from the Perspective of Rhetorical Acceptance. *Northern Literature*, 9, 218-219.
- Wang, W. (2015). On the Implication Beyond Words in the Lines of "The Legend of Zhen Huan". *Journal of Kaifeng Educational College*, 35(5), 48-49.
- Yang, T. (2017). Interpreting the Implication Beyond Words in the Lines of "The Legend of Zhen Huan". *Folklore*, 34, 1005-3948.