



The Construction of Pragmatic Identity from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory: A Case Study of Theodore in The Goldfinch

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Abstract

This paper applies Verschueren's Adaptation Theory to examine the pragmatic identity construction of Theodore Decker, the protagonist in Donna Tartt's novel *The Goldfinch*. The findings show that Theodore adapts to mental, social, and physical worlds during communication, constructing identities as a criminal, a hedonist, and a thinker to achieve his pragmatic goals.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

The Goldfinch, The Adaptation Theory, Pragmatic Identity

1. Introduction

The Adaptation Theory (Verschueren, 1999) [1] is a Pragmatic Theory rising from the 1990s. Over time, researchers have utilized this flexible tool to analyze both real-life and fictional discourse, where speakers constantly adapt their language to social and situational demands. This theory provides a powerful lens for understanding how interlocutors strategically select language to achieve optimal communication outcomes based on contextual principles.

Pragmatic Identity Theory was proposed by Chen Xinren (2013) [2] to examine how individuals dynamically construct and negotiate their social identities, Building on the understanding that identity is fluid rather than fixed, the theory explores how people employ linguistic resources like speech acts, word choices, and grammatical structures to position themselves differently across various social contexts, achieving specific interactional goals while adapting to situational de-

mands. This framework emphasizes the active, context-dependent nature of identity performance in everyday discourse.

Literary discourse, especially characters' dialogue and narration in novels, offers us rich data for examining the pragmatic phenomena within, including identity construction and the adaptation theory.

2. The Theory Background

The word identity is derived from the Latin word "idem" in the etymological aspect. Social identity refers to how individuals define themselves through their connections to social groups, such as their profession, cultural background, or community roles. In terms of linguistics, the Adaptation Theory explains how speakers dynamically adjust their language choices (e.g., pronouns, address terms) to align with contextual factors like time, space, and social relationships. This continuous adaptation process is driven by communicative needs, enabling speakers to construct, negotiate, or reinforce their pragmatic identities in interaction.

2.1. Pragmatic Identity and Its Construction

Identity is a pragmatic resource that can be utilized by communicators. Speakers adapt to contextual factors by employing relevant linguistic resources to construct appropriate identities, thereby increasing the likelihood of achieving communicative goals [3]. The Pragmatic Identity Theory was first proposed by Chen Xinren in 2008, defined as "contextualized, language-user-chosen (consciously or unconsciously) identities for self or interlocutors, as well as other identities (of individuals or groups) mentioned by the speaker/writer in discourse." [4] The relationship between language and identity has always been a key focus in linguistic research; Hornberger and Pütz pointed out that: "For some, language is overwhelmingly about identity; for some, it is partly about identity; for others, it is always about identity." [5] When discussing pragmatic identity choices, communicators construct different pragmatic identities by selecting specific discourse, thereby achieving particular communicative effects; this selection process is dynamic and adaptive, in that speakers must adapt to the immediate linguistic context to achieve their intended communicative goals. Therefore, this study attempts to investigate the pragmatic identities constructed by Theodore Decker, the protagonist of the novel *The Goldfinch*, using Verschueren's (1999) Linguistic Adaptation Theory, to determine how he achieves his pragmatic goals.

2.2. The Adaptation Theory

The Adaptation Theory was proposed by the Belgian linguist Jef Verschueren, Secretary General of the International Pragmatics Association, in 1987. Verschueren advocated for an overarching perspective in pragmatics research, arguing that language users continuously make appropriate choices during communication due to three inherent properties of language: variability, negotiability, and adaptabil-

ity. The contextual factors primarily encompass three dimensions as the mental world, the social world, and the physical world [6]. As a fundamental attribute of language, variability determines the potential range of options available at all structural levels, implying that multiple formal alternatives exist across linguistic hierarchies. This property manifests in pragmatic phenomena, reflecting users' dynamic strategic adjustments to linguistic forms, with the scope of choices itself being fluid. Negotiability refers to the process of linguistic selection not being governed by rigid form-function correspondences but guided by highly flexible principles and strategies. It entails inherent indeterminacy in choices, requiring contextual negotiation as an essentially dynamic construction. Adaptability, another core property, enables humans to make negotiable selections from available options to fulfill basic communicative needs. It indicates that linguistic choices are strategy-driven, serving the ultimate goal of achieving communicative intent. This adaptability operates bidirectionally: linguistic choices must adapt to specific communicative contexts, while the interpretation and utilization of context must adapt to linguistic choices. As the cornerstone of Adaptation Theory, adaptability embodies a dynamic, bidirectional mutual adaptation between contextual factors and linguistic forms during communication. For the three dimensions, the mental world, referring to the psychological elements of communicative participants such as cognitive states, emotions, beliefs, intentions, and motivations; the social world, denoting the social environment in which communication occurs, including social norms, cultural conventions, power relations, institutional rules, the identity roles of interlocutors, and their interrelationships; and the physical world, indicating the concrete spatio-temporal setting of communication, involving objectively perceptible factors such as time (temporal deixis), space (spatial deixis), bodily postures, and the physical surroundings. Language users need to dynamically adjust their linguistic choices based on the specific circumstances within these three worlds: mental, social, and physical to achieve communicative goals. Pragmatic identities exhibit variability, emerging as dynamically constructed products activated in specific contexts; their construction is inherently negotiative. Thus, Adaptation Theory offers explanatory power for understanding pragmatic identity construction, aligning well with dynamic-negotiative perspectives in identity research.

In recent years, Adaptation Theory and pragmatic identity research have continued to develop and become increasingly intertwined. Li (2024) examined strategies for constructing pragmatic identities in political speeches from a meta-discursive perspective [7]. Oza (2024) explored dynamic adaptation mechanisms in literary and cinematic adaptations [8]. And Zhou (2023) integrated these two theories and used the adaptation theory to analyze the pragmatic identity construction of the police role [9]. These studies not only expand the boundaries of pragmatic identity theory but also equip researchers with richer theoretical tools to analyze complex identity construction—such as that of literary characters—through Adaptation Theory.

3. Theodore's Pragmatic Identity in Different Contexts

The construction of Theodore Decker's pragmatic identity is fluid and context-dependent, shifting dynamically in response to varying social environments, psychological pressures, and moral ambiguities throughout *The Goldfinch*.

3.1. The Criminal Identity Adapted in the Mental World

The formation of Theodore's criminal pragmatic identity is inherently inseparable from his impulsive theft of the painting *The Goldfinch* after the museum bombing and his subsequent involvement in art forgery. This identity is by no means a mere external label but rather a dynamic "product of discursive construction," while from the perspective of adaptation theory, it also reflects the adaptive nature of his psychological world. It profoundly shapes the protagonist's interpersonal interactions, inner narrative, and life trajectory. In the novel, these aspects are elaborated in detail through dialogues and inner monologues. Look at the example.

1) "*Out on the avenue, a fire engine screamed high and hard before trailing into the distance. Cars, trucks, loudly-laughing couples coming out of the bars. As I lay awake trying to think of calming things like snow, and stars in the desert, hoping I hadn't swallowed the wrong mix and accidentally killed myself, I did my best to hold tight to the one helpful or comforting fact I'd gleaned from my online reading: stolen paintings were almost impossible to trace unless people tried to sell them, or move them, which was why only twenty per cent of art thieves were ever caught.*" (P. 503).

In here, Theodore Decker's internal monologue following his acquisition of Carel Fabritius's painting, "*The Goldfinch*," provides a compelling case study in how mental world adaptation facilitates the construction of a pragmatic identity, a criminal. The provided excerpt illustrates Theodore's mental processes as he consciously adapts his internal mental world to accommodate and justify his actions, thereby actively shaping his self-perception as someone capable of possessing stolen property. The passage opens with Theodore overwhelmed by external sensory chaos, the scream of a fire engine, loud vehicles, and the laughter of couples emerging from bars. This external dissonance mirrors and amplifies his intense internal turmoil. He seeks refuge in "calming things like snow, and stars in the desert," attempting to impose order on his fractured psychological state. Crucially, his immediate fear centers not solely on the act of theft itself, but on a potential accidental overdose. This focus subtly deflects attention from the moral weight of possessing the stolen painting, revealing an initial psychological strategy which is minimizing the significance of the crime by comparing it with a perceived immediate threat to his very existence. His survival instinct momentarily overshadows his criminal act. Theodore finds clear boundaries for his criminal identity in the online information he discovers: "as long as he doesn't sell or move the painting, it's nearly untraceable." These aren't just general facts to him, but concrete instructions for action. They mean he can safely maintain his criminal iden-

tity by following two simple rules: hide the painting and don't move it.

This information literally tells him how to be a successful “invisible art thief.” His entire identity as a criminal depends on his ability to follow these specific rules: what not to do. Through this internal monologue, we see Theodore actively constructing his identity as a criminal through his inner discourse. He minimizes the significance of the theft by comparing it to his potentially fatal drug mistake. More importantly, he deliberately focuses on information that reduces his sense of risk low chance of getting caught and strictly follows behavioral guidelines (don't sell, don't move). This thought process helps ease his psychological burden while justifying his continued possession of the stolen artwork, reinforcing his self-image as a “hidden criminal” rather than an active lawbreaker. The monologue reveals that identity isn't fixed, but constantly reshaped through psychological adjustments in response to actions and their consequences. The consequences of his criminal act first manifest as an internalized psychological torment in the mental world, through which he linguistically constructs his identity as an offender, an identity that becomes profoundly validated through this very psychological anguish.

3.2. The Hedonist Identity Adapted in the Social World

The ever-changing circumstances in society compel speakers to make deliberate linguistic choices. The social world, refers to the various societal factors involved in the process of discourse selection, which must mutually adapt to one another. For Theodore himself, after the explosion, Theodore's life became deeply driven by a sense of emptiness and escapism, a psychological state that led him to construct a “hedonist identity.” and triggered a profound collapse of his internal sense of order and meaning. For Theodore, losing his mother and falling into a lower social class hurt too much to handle. He had to completely rethink how he fit into society. Even though the society and the world kept going as usual, Theodore started seeing everything differently. He begins to indulge himself to sensory enjoyment, in order to escape both the painful yesterday and the unknown future. This identity is inherently contextualized, which dynamically adapting to changes in drug availability and social circles while persistently reflecting his “dependence on chemical stimulation, pursuit of instant gratification, and transient numbing of traumatic memories.” He utilizes language not merely to indulge but to actively rationalize this internal collapse and construct a functional, though destructive worldview. But He feels no guilt whatsoever, indulging in it with full relish, seeking life's meaning in a “chemical ecstasy”. Look at the following example, illustrating how he linguistically builds and justifies this identity:

2) *“To contemplate the face-clawing worry the dope had saved me—an hour and twenty minutes of anguish! Frantic, phoning the front desk! envisioning cops downstairs! Flooded me with Vedic serenity. Worry! What a waste of time. All the holy books were right. Clearly ‘worry’ was the mark of a primitive and spiritually unevolved person. What was that line from Yeats, about the bemused Chinese*

sages? All things fall and are built again. Ancient glittering eyes. This was wisdom. People had been raging and weeping and destroying things for centuries and wailing about their puny individual lives, when—what was the point? All this useless sorrow? Consider the lilies of the field. Why did anyone ever worry about anything? Weren't we, as sentient beings put upon the earth to be happy, in the brief time allotted to us? Keeps talking nonsense to prove Clevinger's guilt. Not to mention that there is no justice, and even normal communication becomes impossible. The failure of the interaction between people in the novel means the collapse of the social order.” (P. 863)

Theodore's hedonist pragmatic identity is his primary adaptation to the ruins of his psychological world. He twists normal ideas to make his bad choices seem okay, and systematically manipulates religious and philosophical texts to serve his purposes. For example, Biblical references like “Consider the lilies of the field”, which is originally about trusting in divine providence, become twisted justifications for his irresponsibility. He constructed his pragmatic identity by distorting the reality to suit his goals. By acting like only the present matters (“life is short”), he ignores how today's choices affect tomorrow. When he says “Not to mention that there is no justice...” functions not merely as an observation but as a foundational pillar of his new adapted worldview, rejecting a fundamental social norm and absolving himself of guilt. This linguistic choice allows him to sustain behaviors like drug abuse, deception, and possession of stolen property (“the dope had saved me... envisioning cops downstairs!”) by framing them as rational responses within his internally collapsed moral and existential framework. He chooses to escape reality through refuse to believe in the existence of justice. This way of life helps him steal and lie without feeling guilty. His adaptation grows more troubling through active reliance on social breakdown. As justice systems fail and communication collapses, Theodore doesn't seek to restore order but indulges himself while creating an illusion to avoid confronting the pain and trauma of reality. This hedonistic identity creates a self-reinforcing cycle of destruction. While providing temporary relief from anxiety (like using drugs to feign “serenity” during police searches), it progressively erodes his humanity. Each act of reducing profound wisdom to pleasure-seeking justifications further destroys his capacity for social existence. Theodore's adaptation to the social world aligns with the distorted reality he perceives. His hedonistic identity emerges as a logical response to the broken systems and hypocrisies he encounters, and he successfully achieves this pragmatic goal of constructing a functional (if destructive) identity. This reveals how individuals may develop coping mechanisms that not only mirror their dysfunctional environment, but also effectively serve their immediate survival needs within it. All these linguistic choices, deconstructing, appropriating, rejecting, are Theodore's way of negotiating the value system of the social world. Under the influence of drugs, and shaped by his personality and experiences, he does this to satisfy his inner desire to escape anxiety and seek peace and happiness. The result is the dynamic construction and reinforcement of his identity as a hedonist, one

who chases temporary calm and immediate pleasure, while maintaining a detached attitude toward social chaos.

3.3. The Thinker Identity Adapted in the Physical World

In the Adaptation Theory, temporal and spatial deixis are the two most extensively studied and prominent ways in which linguistic choices reflect the physical world. Within the framework of Adaptation Theory, adaptation to the physical world is most prominently manifested in language users' dynamic choices concerning temporal deixis and spatial deixis (Verschueren, 1999) [2]. These choices directly anchor utterances to specific spatio-temporal coordinates while serving immediate communicative purposes. In the pragmatic process, temporal and spatial factors in the physical world constrain the speaker's discourse choices. Let's see the following example:

3) Boris: "I'm not sure I see your point."

Theodore:

"Well—I have to say I personally have never drawn such a sharp line between 'good' and 'bad' as you. For me, that line is often false. The two are never disconnected. One can't exist without the other. As long as I am acting out of love, I feel I am doing best I know how. But you—wrapped up in judgment, always regretting the past, cursing yourself, blaming yourself, asking 'what if,' "what if. 'Life is cruel.' 'I wish I had died instead of. Well—think about this. What if all your actions and choices, good or bad, make no difference to God? What if the pattern is pre-set? No no—hang on—this is a question worth struggling with. What if our badness and mistakes are the very thing that set our fate and bring us round to good? What if, for some of us, we can't get there any other way?" (P.929)

Within the Adaptation Theory framework, the physical world primarily refers to the concrete spatiotemporal context of communication, encompassing elements such as time (the moment and duration of an interaction) and space (the location of the exchange and the physical presence of participants). Language users must select and adjust linguistic forms according to these specific coordinates in the physical world to achieve communicative goals. Temporal deixis (tense, temporal adverbs) and spatial deixis (locative adverbs, demonstrative pronouns, bodily orientation) constitute the most fundamental means through which language adapts to the physical world. Theodore's construction of his "thinker" identity during his dialogue with Boris exemplifies a profound adaptation to the specific spatiotemporal context of their conversation. After Boris expressed his inability to comprehend Theodore's lengthy philosophical discourse, Theodore launched into yet another extended monologue to articulate his contemplation on life and existential understanding. When Boris states, "I'm not sure I see your point," Theodore immediately launches into an extended monologue articulating his reflections on life and existence. The precise temporal point and spatial location of this exchange are crucial to his identity construction. From the temporal dimension, Theodore's response exhibits intense immediacy in the adaptation

theory. He is not abstractly expounding philosophy but directly addressing Boris's expressed confusion at this very moment. He promptly points out how Boris is "wrapped up in judgment, always regretting the past, cursing yourself, blaming yourself, asking 'what if'" and follows this with a series of urgent "What if" inquiries. This real-time, progressively intensifying rhetorical rhythm anchors abstract philosophical speculation in the immediate present of the dialogue. His use of present tense ("I feel," "life is cruel") and rhetorically charged questions compels Boris to engage with these issues here and now, rather than treating them as abstract topics. The power of his core argument, that "our badness and mistakes are the very thing that set our fate and bring us round to good" lies precisely in its aim to disrupt Boris's current mindset at this specific instant within the unfolding conversation. From the spatial dimension, the co-presence within the shared physical space profoundly shapes Theodore's linguistic choices. The face-to-face nature of the dialogue allows Theodore to establish an explicit contrast between "you" (Boris) and "I" (Theodore) from the outset ("I have to say I personally have never drawn such a sharp line... as you"). This spatial co-location enables Theodore to transform a potentially abstract discussion into a personalized exchange unfolding in this specific place and directed at the person physically before him. When he interjects "wait a minute", this is not merely a discourse marker; it is a strategy within this physical space to ensure Boris's focused attention on complex ideas. His goal is not a monologue but an attempt to alter the cognitive perspective of the person in this immediate room. Notably, as his argument deepens, Theodore shifts his pronoun usage from "you"/"I" to the more inclusive "our" ("our badness and mistakes," "for some of us"), symbolizing his use of spatial proximity to draw Boris into a shared conceptual space, rather than maintaining separation. After enduring all the suffering, joy, and redemption, Theodore emerged as a thinker. The way Theodore builds his pragmatic identity as a "thinker" in this conversation shows how well he works within the actual time and space of the discussion. When we look at the timing, his response isn't just abstract philosophy, it's a direct answer to Boris's challenge in that moment. He starts thinking out loud right away, pointing out how Boris is always stuck thinking about past mistakes and present regrets. Then he pushes forward with his "What if" questions, building his ideas step by step as the conversation moves forward in real time. His urgent tone makes it clear this isn't just theoretical, he wants Boris to really think about these questions now, not later. His main point about how our mistakes might actually lead us to good things isn't just an idea, it's meant to shake up Boris's current way of thinking right there in that moment. In terms of physical space, Theodore makes this a very direct, face-to-face exchange. He sets up a clear contrast between "you" and "I" from the start, turning what could be an abstract discussion into a personal back-and-forth happening right then and there. When he says "wait a minute," he's not just pausing the conversation - he's making sure Boris in that same room is really paying attention to these complicated thoughts. This isn't Theodore thinking to himself—it's him trying to change how the person right in front of him sees things. Interestingly, as he gets deeper into his point, he

starts saying “our” mistakes and “for some of us,” bringing Boris into the same mental space rather than keeping them separate. Finally, from the perspective of adaptation theory, Theodore’s identity construction in time and space is also closely linked to his strategic response to Boris’s speech. Rather than simply converging with or opposing Boris, he adapts his rhetorical approach by adjusting the pacing, rhythm, and focus of the conversation. While acknowledging shared concerns—such as love, regret, and fate, he introduces higher-order reflections that subtly shift the axis of the discussion. In doing so, Theodore maintains the interactive flow of the conversation while asserting a distinct cognitive position. This balance between adaptation and difference allows him to lead the discourse without overt confrontation, grounding the thinker identity not only in the content of what he says but also in how he says it, within a temporal and spatial context that makes it believable, embodied, and pragmatically coherent.

4. Conclusion

This paper integrates Verschueren’s Adaptation Theory and pragmatic identity construction theory to examine how the protagonist Theodore in *The Goldfinch* constructs his pragmatic identities across different dimensions. Through analysis, Theodore’s primary identities are categorized as the “criminal,” the “hedonist,” and the “thinker,” each of which adapts to distinct psychological, social, and physical worlds, thereby achieving his communicative goals as a speaker. Theodore’s pragmatic identity is thus dynamic, and his successful adaptation in discourse aligns with his interactional objectives.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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