

On the Language Strategies in the Chinese Debating TV Show from the Perspective of Interpersonal Function Theory

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Abstract

Taking the interpersonal function theory as the theoretical framework, this study selects the popular online talk show “*Qi Pa speaking*” in China as the data to analyze language strategies used by debaters to win votes and supports. The TV program, “*Qi Pa Speaking*”, is a new program format, which is popular with people at all ages. It is different from the traditional form of debating competition with serious atmosphere, on the contrary, the atmosphere of the show is relaxed and lively. The results show that the declarative and exclamatory moods are two frequently used strategies by the debaters. The declarative mood usually implies the earnest instruction, while exclamatory mood helps to make the arguments more convincing. The use of different moods also reflects the different personalities of the debaters.

Keywords: interpersonal function, mood, debating language

1. Introduction

For better or for worse, human language has a great influence on interpersonal relationships. Many of the conflicts between human beings are a direct result of human language, so it is wise to master some language strategies to avoid this kind of situation from happening. As a tool, language only belongs to human beings and is used by people for various purposes. We can use language to express ideas, to greet people, to impart knowledge, etc. Halliday proposed the theory of Systemic Functional Grammar in 1976. Halliday (2000) claim that language has three metafunctions, i.e., ideational, interpersonal and textual functions. In this study, we focus on the interpersonal function, which includes the mood, the modality and the key. The interpersonal function works as the function of exchanging message and reflecting the communication between the speaker and the hearer. It aims to show the interpersonal relationship of people in different social status.

In recent years, interpersonal function has been widely used in the analysis of advertisement, news and public speaking, etc. For instance, Zhao and Chen (2019) analyzed the interpersonal function in business English speeches of Jack Ma and Bill Gates. They compared their business speeches in three levels and drew their conclusion. Cao (2017) made a comparison of the first TV debate of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in their presidential campaign with the framework of interpersonal function theory. In her study, she paid attention to the modal words and came to a conclusion that the use of modality will show the personality of different people and that helps to gain more supports from others. Zhao and Feng (2012) found that the persuasiveness of advertisement depends on the application of the modality system to a large extent, and advertisement makers can choose different language forms with different expressions according to the communication demands. Fu (2019) discovered that in news discourse, interpersonal function reflects the main content of news mainly relying on the context. For the “*One Belt And One Road*”, a clearer expression of context is needed to reduce unnecessary misunderstandings caused by cultural differences among countries. However, we noticed that these studies mainly analyzed interpersonal function either in the discourse of advertisement, news, business and politics public speaking and few studies are engaged in debating language. Therefore, taking the interpersonal function as the theoretical framework, this paper analyses the strategies of debating language in a popular talk show named “*Qi Pa speaking*”. Different from other talk shows, “*Qi Pa speaking*” is a platform created for young

people, where they can express themselves freely on any topic in daily life. The purpose of this study is to see how people use language to win votes and to maintain good relationships.

2. Research Methodology

In this study we adopt both quantitative and qualitative methods. “*Qi Pa speaking*” is an interesting online entertainment program, which is popular with people at any age. Each debater has his own language and debating style. Sometimes, some dirty but reasonable words are employed to prove his/her own view, or tell stories or experiences of their own on how they deal with their interpersonal crisis. According to Tao (2018), the debaters choose receptive words in accordance with the circle to which the audience belong. No matter what debate topic they get, they defend their standpoint and win the warm applauds from the audience. That means the idea they convey has been accepted.

Each show has two groups, consisting of 6 people respectively. Three of them belong to the pro-side group and the rest the anti-side group. The audience could give their votes at any time according to the performance of both groups. There are 26 shows in the first season. And in each show, the debaters will be given different debating topics.

The debating topic of *the show selected* is “pushing to get married is to show love or perversion”. This show includes 190 sentences. We record every sentence and classify them into declarative, interrogative and exclamatory sentences according to the mood of interpersonal function to find out the strategies these debaters use.

3. Language Strategies in Chinese Debating TV Show

3.1 The Distribution of Mood Systems

As we all know, there are three main mood types, i.e., declarative mood, interrogative mood and exclamatory mood. The declarative mood is used to describe the facts that have already existed. The interrogative mood is used to obtain message by the way of giving question. The use of exclamatory mood plays an important role in self-expression, which makes it easier to strike a chord with others. In addition, it helps to strengthen what the speaker said. Thompson (2013) believed that the use of language has a certain purpose and not only serves as a unilateral information transmission function, but also includes the functions of communication and content exchange. The following two tables are the classification of the pro-side group sentences and the anti-side group sentences in terms of the mood system.

Table 1. The distribution of moods used by pro-side debaters

	First debater: <i>Jin Yuxuan</i>	Second debater: <i>Fan Tiantian</i>	Third debater: <i>Ai Li</i>
Interrogative	12	4	5
Exclamatory	1	18	7
Declarative	13	19	16

The pro-side group is for the idea “pushing to get married is to show love.” From Table 1, we can see that the pro-side group tends to use more declarative sentences. Among the 26 words *Jin* said, 13 of them are declarative sentences. *Fan* said 19 and *Ai* said 16 declarative sentences. That is to say, all of them have the tendency to use the declarative mood.

Table 2. The distribution of moods used by anti-side debaters

	First debater: <i>Ji Zexi</i>	Second debater: <i>Bao Jianghao</i>	Third debater: <i>Ma Weiwei</i>
Interrogative	4	6	13
Exclamatory	14	3	24
Declarative	2	8	21

The anti-side group is for the opposite idea “pushing to get married is to show perversion.” From Table 2, we can notice that in this group these three people would like to use the exclamatory sentences and to express their exclamatory mood. *Ji*’s include 14 and *Ma* 24 exclamatory sentences. However, the exclamatory sentences *Bao* uses is relatively little. Despite of this, this group’s forte is the use of exclamatory sentences to win votes.

3.2 Declarative Mood in Chinese Debating TV Show

In this section, we will illustrate how the declarative mood plays a significant part in a debating competition. The followings are examples:

Jin Yuxuan: Urging marriage is out of love. People who urge you to get married are the ones who love you and hope that you have a happy family as well as to be protected and cared for. Therefore, if we really care someone, we will encourage him/her to get married early.

From what *Jin* said, we know that *Jin* wants to express that only people who really love and care you will urge you to get married. Firstly, he holds his ground that “urging marriage is out of love”. He wants the audience to understand his standpoint. Secondly, he unfolds his understanding of urging marriage. No one will urge you to get married except for those who love you. It is obvious that they hope you would be happy and be taken care of by someone for the rest of your life. Thirdly, he stresses again why we urge our friends or our relatives to get married, because we care about them. He uses the declarative mood to express his simple, honest but deep love.

Fan Tiantian: I was born in 1980. And I am 34 years old. I do not get married. First of all, I, on behalf of the competitors who hold the counterargument, apologize to their mothers in front of TV. As a matter of fact, when I get this topic, I believe that my opponents will take advantage of our team and they have a good reason to support themselves. After all, in a modern society, it is hard to distinguish what is normal or not.

From what *Fan* says, we know that she takes the strategy by putting herself in others' position. On the one hand, she firstly makes an apology to all parents who are urging their children to get married but are regarded as the perverted parents. On the other hand, she admits that the opposite view is easier to debate. In the first step, she tries to get the empathy from the audience. She wants them to make a self-reflection. Our parents try their best to create a comfortable environment for us. They bring us up and give us unconditional love and care and what they want just to see we get married while we view their action as perversion. In the second step, she indicates that she may have a chance to choose the opposite view, but she refuses. Because she doesn't want to hurt the parents. Lastly, she emphasizes that in the modern society people maybe can't distinguish what is perversion and what is love. Again, she wants to get the empathy from the audience.

Ai li: What I am going to say is your mother must have compelled you to wear “Qiuku”. So does my mother. Then why does your mom force you to wear “Qiuku”? The answer is very simple. That's because it is cold. So we can say what she does is a way to express her concern for us. Actually, almost everyone is asked to wear more clothes by his/her mother. They force us to do something out of love. Just like their urging us to get married, it is also a kind of love.

Taking the daily care as an example, *Ai* wants to indicate that just as this kind of situation, when it is getting cold, our parents usually warn us to put on more clothes. They don't want us to catch a cold. The behavior of “urging you to get marriage” is the same. Therefore, our parents urge us to get married is also the sign of love. From another perspective to say, the reason our parents urge us to get married is that we are old enough to get married. Maybe they have seen that your friends got married and even some of them have babies, while you are still a single one. They just worry about you and they don't want to see you to be left.

From the pro-side view, we can come to a conclusion that three people in this group express their ideas from different perspectives and all of them use the declarative mood to convey message. *Jin* expresses his ideas from his own understanding about the action of urging marriage and his argument is reasonable. *Fan* always tries to get the empathy from the audience because she chooses to stand in others' shoes. And *Ai* takes measure to connect the daily care with the behavior of urging marriage. His arguments emphasize his own understanding of the topic “urging you to get married” and he wants people to view their parents' action as the daily care and it is no different from the love our parents give as usual.

3.3 Exclamatory Mood in Chinese Debating TV Show

In this section, we mainly talk about the function of exclamatory mood. And we will give some examples to show how this mood works.

Ji Zexi: *Yanni*, one of my friends, meets more than one hundred boys in one year! Everybody! One year, 365 days! To date one hundred boys within one year means *Yanni* should date a boy in every three and a half days! Parents and friends all persuade us to get married. Please give us some time and space!

In this paragraph, what catches our eyes first is the outstanding symbol “!”. Firstly, when we see these sentences, it seems that the speaker is full of complaints. Because the symbol “!” will put the intangible pressure on us, which indicates that you have to listen to me. Secondly, when we analyze these sentences in detail, we could

read that the examples *Ji* gives us explain such a phenomenon that our parent has done too far in the aspect of our marriage matters. Just like the examples provided, *Yanni's mother* forces her to have a blind date with different people at least twice a week. This kind of behavior is absolutely wrong. So frequent date with males that *Yanni* maybe have no chance to maintain a relationship with a boy she has feelings to. Not to mention they have chance to learn more about each other. Her mother's behavior will lead to a direct result that *Yanni* indeed meets a lot of people, but she still could not to meet her Mr. Right. As parents, they should not force their children to make a blind date like this. On the contrary, their deeds will make their children feel tired of getting married. What's worse, their children would like to live away from them. Thirdly, *Ji* added that whether our parents or our good friends, none of them has the right to compel us to choose our husband or wife. This exclamatory mood confirms *Ji's* standpoint again.

Bao Jianghao: So let's think about such a situation! My dad urges me to get married, in turn, can I hasten him for a promotion? Is that ok? However, the actual case is this. Your dad said earnestly to you: "ah! My boy! You're not too young to get married, are you? You have little opportunity to meet proper girls. I know you maybe feel shy to take your girlfriend home. Don't worry. We can chat with her about some things that you are embarrassed to say." That's what our dad would say, right?

From this paragraph, we can see that compared with the first debater *Ji*, the second debater *Bao* uses the interrogatory sentences more frequently. Here we should make a supplement that the performance of *Bao* doesn't help their team win votes and his arguments about this topic make people feel bored. He always compares the topic "urge you to get married" with "hasten my father to get promotion", which makes his arguments less convincing. So we don't talk more about his language use in here.

Ma Weiwei: Apart from our parents, our relatives compelling us to get married are the main source of pressure. Why? Your mom won't put pressure on you, because she loves you. The real pressure putting on you is the so-called relatives give, especially during the spring festival, when you visit them or you just run into them! They are those who call you "leftover men" and "leftover women"! Those who call you "single dog"! Be prudent about your marriage! No matter what pressure you confront from society! No matter how scared you are when you get home! No matter how nervous you are! If nobody wants to marry you due to your age, it doesn't matter! Because began an unprepared marriage is much more terrible than these pressures and loneliness.

Ma firstly holds such an argument, that is, people who give you the marriage pressure are not your parents, but your relatives and people who say you are "leftover men and women" and people who say you are "a single lady or a single man". In here, she classifies these people into two levels. The first level is the so called "relatives". At this point, your pressure comes from you relatives. The second level is the people you maybe don't know. And for you, they are just strangers but considering your age they will say you are "a single lady or a single man". At this point, you pressure comes from the society. Secondly, what she wants to emphasize is that you should be prudent of your own marriage matters. You should marry someone whom you want to have a real relationship with. You should have your own view of marriage, and no one has the right to force you to marry someone in such a hurry decision. Thirdly, *Ma* made a deep impression on us. She is a woman with bravery and tact to face the challenges in life. Most importantly, she sets us a good example. We should dare to challenge authority and we should keep our mind clear to deal with difficulties confronted in our life.

From the anti-side view, we can feel that what they said is more convincing than the pro-side team. Firstly, the big difference between the pro-side and the anti-side group is that they use different sentences patterns, the former uses more declarative sentences while the latter uses more exclamatory sentences. Secondly, we know that different sentence patterns could convey different moods. The declarative mood is weaker than the exclamatory mood. In other words, if we use more exclamatory mood, we maybe get more votes from the audience, because it is easy to strike a chord with the audience. Thirdly, the anti-side group indirectly negates the view of the pro-side group. In their point view, people who force you to get married are your so called "relatives". In fact, your parents would not compel you to do it because they love you. Whether to get married or not, you should make you own decision. This is your right and can't be deprived by any people. They use the exclamatory mood to show their determination.

4. Conclusion

Language has a significant influence on the interpersonal relationship. Learning to use language wisely is a skill that we must master. As one of the three metafunctions, the interpersonal function has attracted more and more attention. Taking the interpersonal function as the framework, this paper chooses data from one of online talk shows "*Qi Pa speaking*", by using the quantitative and qualitative method to analyze the language strategies used in *Chinese Debating TV Show*.

The results show that the use of exclamatory mood is more convincing than the use of the declarative mood at some point and the exclamatory mood is stronger than the emotion expressed by declarative mood. However, we could not forget the declarative mood also has its own advantages. For example, if we use declarative mood appropriately, it helps to work as a warning and that will make people do some self-reflection. No matter the declarative mood or the exclamatory mood, the use of both moods can strike a chord with audience and get supports from others. Although these debaters' arguments are different from each other, but their core point is the same.

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