Research on the Intercultural Communication of the Programme Informal Talks from the Perspective of Interactive Linguistics

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Abstract: *This paper is based on authentic spoken data from the Programme Informal Talks and employs an interactional communication perspective to analyze the conversational patterns and sequential environments presented in the corpus. It aims to reveal the discourse representations in a cross-cultural context and to explore the interaction mechanisms between conversational patterns and socio-cultural factors, when communicators express differing stances, they may employ various conversational patterns that correspond to the content of the discourse, the appropriateness of the discourse, and the expression of negative emotional attitudes. When targeting the content of the discourse, negation can be conveyed through articulating opposing views, rejecting established social norms, or negating implicit meanings. When addressing the appropriateness of the discourse, subsequent statements often reflect the speaker's need for specific clarification, which may involve challenging the authority of the knowledge presented.*

Keywords: Intercultural communication, Evaluative stance, Conversational pattern.

1. Introduction

Interactional linguistics focuses on the study of language based on interactive behavior, advocating for the effective integration of intercultural communication and discourse analysis. Gumperz (2001) pointed out that all communication belongs to the realm of culture. Therefore, communicative conversations in cross-cultural contexts become the convergence point of discourse practices and multicultural elements. In recent years, some scholars have proposed a new perspective in interactional linguistics, suggesting that research should not be limited to micro-level linguistic studies but should also consider the macro-level intercultural communication by examining individual and environmental factors in interactional communication.

In this study, we will employ an interactional perspective in authentic, dynamic communication, we aim to better observe how discourse behavior shapes speech functions, understand the communicative intentions of speakers, and explore the relationship between language and culture. Additionally, we will investigate the significant role that authentic discourse practices play in enhancing intercultural communication competence. The research questions addressed in this paper are as follows:

(1) By analyzing the conversational patterns of authentic spoken data, how do communicators from different cultural backgrounds interact to construct dialogue?

(2) What insights into intercultural communication can be gained from exploring the discourse practices of intermediate and advanced Chinese learners from an interactional communication perspective?

2. Literature Review

Current academic research on discourse in cross-cultural contexts primarily focuses on four areas. The first area involves comparing official discourse from a cross-cultural perspective and exploring the construction of national image through discourse analysis. The second area utilizes critical discourse analysis theory to interpret discourse texts in news media. The third area examines discourse features and intercultural conflicts in the field of translation. These three areas are largely confined to the study of written discourse in specific contexts, with insufficient attention paid to spoken discourse in informal settings. In recent years, with the rise of interactional linguistics, numerous studies have emerged from the perspective of interactional communication. These studies include research on stance markers in spoken discourse in interview programs, oral errors of advanced Chinese learners, discourse markers and fixed expressions, and dissent speech acts of Chinese learners. However, few studies have integrated language and culture in cross-cultural contexts, with communicators' cultural backgrounds often only considered as causal factors. The multiple discourses are closely related to cultural identity and the way information is cued in the same context differs for interlocutors from different cultural backgrounds, proposing that interactional linguistics has explanatory power for communication barriers between China and the West.

3. Stance Marking in Discourse and Conversational Patterns

Du Bois (2007) argues that stance expression in interactional communication is a cooperative construction by conversational participants, using specific linguistic forms to convey judgments, viewpoints, attitudes, and emotional tendencies toward a certain subject or proposition. Due to its "talk show" format, guests from different cultural backgrounds hold diverse attitudes and viewpoints on the discussion topics, and the conversation often unfolds in clusters or extended passages. This paper will first explore the different conversational patterns that emerge under various stances expressed by guests from different countries.

3.1 Stance-oriented Discourse Content

When the speaker adopts a negative evaluative stance, it can indicate the speaker's disapproval or lack of endorsement of certain aspects of the interlocutor's discourse content. This may include the speaker's views and opinions on a particular matter, as well as their assertions and judgments regarding a specific fact.

3.1.1 Presenting Opposing Views

Qian Duoduo: What I want to say is that a nursing home is not a home ((laughs)), it's not a home, it's not as comfortable as a home. It's actually more like a- a fancy prison, a luxury prison- a luxury prison.
Ou Ou: Really? Your parents gave birth to you, and when you were growing up, they were always there for you. When they grow old, do you want to repay them with complaints? How should I put it?
Host: Repay their kindness.
Ou Ou: Yes, repay their kindness...In a nursing home, you have to rely on luck, because you never know what the temperament of the nurse will be like. If you get a nurse like me, then you're in trouble, right?
Zuo You: But when you put them in a nursing home, you don't just leave them there and say, "OK, bye, see you next time." You can visit them every day.
Mu Xiaolong: But Zuo You, what I'm saying is that even if the nursing home is great, it may be comfortable for their bodies, but mentally they won't feel comfortable at all.

This discussion revolves around the topic of whether parents should be placed in nursing homes. The interaction shifted from a conventional two-party exchange to a multi-party conversation, where participants actively competed for turns, frequently using the transition marker "but" to express contradictory perspectives. Each viewpoint was supported by specific reasoning; for instance, Ou Ou argued that the quality of nursing home services depends on "whether the nurses are good-tempered," Mu Xiaolong believed that "the elderly may feel mentally uncomfortable," while Zuo You asserted that nursing homes can take good care of parents because "parents also have friends there." This discussion highlights differences in the speakers' cultural backgrounds. Ou Ou, Mu Xiaolong, and Qian Duoduo, who opposed the idea of placing parents in nursing homes, hail from Vietnam, Turkey, and Africa, respectively. They have a strong sense of family and close family relationships, which leads them to emotionally reject the idea of separating from their parents. In contrast, Zuo You, who supports the idea, is American, values individualism and independent living, and believes that parents and children should focus on their own lives, without the necessity of "personally taking care of parents."

3.1.2 Rejection of Established Social Norms

The term "fixed patterns" can also be referred to as "stereotypes" or "stereotyping," which denotes the simplified cognitive methods people use to generalize and describe members of a particular group. In linguistic research, Lakoff (1987:85) refers to "fixed patterns" as "social stereotypes," suggesting that these patterns reflect the "normal expectations" of social groups to some extent. In the cognitive domain, anything that deviates from these normal expectations is often represented in language through marked means or specific structures.

Da Zuo: Actually, a lot of people have a question for you.
A Lei: What question?
Da Zuo: How is it that you, as an Italian, can't play soccer?
A Lei: What do you mean by that? Does that mean all Chinese people must know kung fu?
*Yang Di: Of course! We all do! Take this! *[mimics a kung fu move]**

The question "How is it that you, as an Italian, can't play soccer?" reflects Da Zuo's stereotype, which is quite common in intercultural communication. In linguistics, such stereotypes are classified as "social fixed patterns," representing attitudes and opinions that speakers express based on cognitive assumptions. A Lei responds with a rhetorical question to negate this stereotype, using the fixed structure "must know" to counter the assumption. Here, a conflict of ideas arises between the interlocutors, with A Lei's rhetorical question carrying a somewhat strong tone of rebuttal, making it unpredictable how Da Zuo might respond in the third turn. However, the host Yang Di takes over the conversation by employing multimodal means (gesturing a kung fu move) to ease the tension.

3.1.3 Negation of Implicit Meaning

Da Zuo: He made it himself? How can you even eat that?
Tang Xiaoqiang: Why not? What's wrong with it?

The speaker's utterance is not a true interrogative, as it is not used to express inquiry but rather to imply that the raw meatballs made by Tang Xiaoqiang are inedible. The intention behind the statement is filled with distrust toward Tang Xiaoqiang's cooking skills. Tang Xiaoqiang detects this implied meaning and immediately uses a rhetorical question to negate it, which can also be understood as a denial of the unstated implication.

3.2 Position-Oriented Discourse Appropriateness

Negative evaluative stances can also pertain to the appropriateness of discourse, indicating that the speaker considers the other's remarks to be unsuitable in a given context.

Ruan Yixin: It's not even as good as the Great Wall.
Beileitai: Not as good as China's? Are you sure you want to say that?

Upon hearing Ruan Yixin's comment, Beileitai immediately seized the floor, adopting a rhetorical question format, with a noticeably raised volume during the program, to express that he found Ruan Yixin's remark inappropriate in the context of their communication. Evaluating the appropriateness of discourse based on a negative stance relies heavily on the speaker's own knowledge and background. Therefore, a speaker's negative evaluative stance on discourse appropriateness is often related to epistemic authority. Beileitai, having won the Chinese Bridge competition twice and participated in multiple Chinese debate competitions, has a higher proficiency in Chinese than the other guests, having

lived in China for nearly a decade. Compared to Ruan Yixin, Beileitai is more attuned to the use of the "politeness principle" in Chinese, and based on his own background, he judged that Ruan Yixin's remarks violated this principle.

3.3 Negative Emotional Attitude

In this usage, the discourse still formally indicates negation, but it no longer simply negates the content. Instead, it conveys the speaker's negative emotional attitude

Mico: This is wrong, we admit it's wrong. What we're saying —if a child makes a small mistake, and we explain it to them, and they still don't understand, then you have to discipline them. Because if a child isn't afraid of their parents, they'll really face a lot of problems in the future. Some people say, "I was hit before, and if it was my mom who hit me, she'd say, 'Just wait until your dad gets home tonight.'" And I would be really scared. I wouldn't do anything after that. My dad never hit me, and now I'm 25 years old, and I've never hit anyone. It didn't affect my life at all. I became such a good person because my mom disciplined me.
Tian Yuanhao: No, I think you have some psychological issues.

This passage revolves around the topic of "whether parents should hit their children in the course of education." The Italian, Mico, used his own example to illustrate that it was precisely due to his mother's upbringing, including being disciplined physically during his growth, that he became "such a good person" today, thereby arguing that "parents should hit their children." On the other hand, the Briton, Tian Yuanhao, found it difficult to accept this notion and even refrained from directly negating the speaker's argument. Instead, he adopted a statement like "you have psychological issues," which is likely to damage the speaker's face, to express his aversion to the idea of "hitting children" and his strong disapproval of Mico's viewpoint. This type of negation no longer targets just the content of the discourse but also conveys the speaker's strong negative emotional attitude.

4. Insights for Intercultural Communication Competence

4.1 Mastering Communication Strategies: Integrating Language and Multimodal Approaches

The program demonstrates that intercultural communication, influenced by different backgrounds, does not always result in harmonious and friendly interactions. Due to obstacles in understanding information, limitations in communication forms, and differences in national character and thinking styles, communicative conflicts are inevitable in intercultural contexts. In pursuit of personal will, issues such as turn-taking struggles, pronounced expressions of disagreement, and strong tones of rebuttal may arise. Communicators can employ a combination of linguistic and multimodal strategies to alleviate embarrassment and resolve conflicts. The use of this "partial agreement" conversational strategy effectively mitigated the degree of face-threatening acts. In intercultural communication involving differing evaluative stances, to reduce the potential for communicative conflict arising from "dissenting expressions," communicators can employ

pragmatic strategies such as partial agreement, sharing personal experiences to clarify information, enhancing empathy, using humor, and adopting mitigative expressions. Mastering the art of communication and selecting appropriate methods for expressing "dissent" are crucial.

4.2 Emphasizing the Development of Cultural Contrast Awareness

Zhao Yang (2021) posits that the most crucial component of intercultural communication competence is intercultural awareness, which entails recognizing the relativity of one's own culture and the value of other cultures, and understanding them with an open and inclusive attitude. The program *Informal Talks* creates an intercultural context where multiple communicators engage in cultural discussions through linguistic exchanges, seeking understanding amidst value collisions. By analyzing the conversational interactions of the guests, one can gain insight into the underlying cultural differences. In real-world intercultural communication, it is essential to cultivate an awareness of "cultural relativism" and use cultural comparison methods to comprehend the inevitability of conflictual events. Employing both verbal and non-verbal strategies can help resolve challenges encountered in intercultural communication.

In the process of collecting discourse from foreign representatives, the author observed an interesting phenomenon. One of the program hosts often exhibited "cultural centrism" in their speech, repeatedly emphasizing that "China is such an ancient and vast civilization" and that "the profound heritage of five thousand years of Chinese history captivates you." However, when foreign representatives heard such statements, they showed little interest, with neutral expressions and no response. This type of expression confirms Anne Maass's "linguistic intergroup bias" which suggests that excessive promotion of one's cultural superiority can also imply a denigration of other cultures. Similar issues are not only present in this host but are also observed by the author in the teaching practices of teachers of Chinese as a foreign language and in the compilation of cultural textbooks. This is an area that the academic community is currently advocating for improvement (Li Quan, 2015). In cultural exchanges, we need to pay attention to the "interpersonal relationships" between subjects, focusing on how to "represent oneself" in intercultural communication, and how to use discourse construction and dissemination to bridge the gap with the "other," advancing mutual understanding and cooperation in cultural exchange and promoting a new era of intercultural communication. As Professor Cui Xiliang stated, "We must view the world from China's perspective and view China from the world's perspective."

5. Conclusion

This paper based on the authentic spoken corpus from the sixth season of Informal Talks, employs an interactional communication perspective to analyze the conversational patterns presented in the corpus. It explores the discursive representations in a cross-cultural context and delves into the interactional mechanisms between conversation and culture. The study provides valuable insights for intercultural

communication and advocates for intercultural communicators to employ discourse strategies appropriately, promoting intercultural communication with an attitude of equality and inclusiveness.

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