

Contrastive Analysis of Interpersonal Metafunction in Chinese and English TED Talks

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Abstract: TED Talks are now used to spread knowledge among the people, and people have begun to pay more attention to interpersonal communication in a one-way manner. According to the theory of interpersonal function in Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper will compare the Chinese and English editions of TED Talks. The three progressive levels are the Mood system, the Modality system and the Appraisal system; they study the difference in attitude between the Subject and the Finite, the participation of interrogative and imperative structures, the graduation features of modalization and modulation, and the attitudinal presentation of affect, judgment and engagement resources. Based on the above statistics, English talk is more dependent on explicit grammatical markers and clear graduation scales; it has distinct boundaries for stance and shows a stronger contraction of dialogic space. Modal particles, subject ellipsis and contextual inference are used in Chinese speech to show social relationships, and they have a relatively high degree of stance fluidity and use more inclusive and softening expressions of engagement. The difference in the two languages for encoding interpersonal metafunctions is not that one is superior to the other; rather, they are different expressions of their respective linguistic systems and cultural norms under the same communicative goal.

Keywords: Interpersonal Metalinguistic Function, TED Talks, Chinese-English Comparison, Mood System, Appraisal System

Introduction

TED Talks have spread around the world in a short period of time due to their brevity, conciseness and emotional appeal; a typical feature is that speakers need to move the audience emotionally and make them think in just a few minutes. As one of the three metafunctions in Systemic Functional Linguistics, the interpersonal metafunction refers to how language creates social relations and expresses attitudes; thus, it can be used to study the strategies of interaction in this type of one-way communication. Chinese and English have systematic structural differences in mood markers, modal resources and evaluative lexis; it is worth studying how these differences affect speakers' modulation of distance, authority and empathy with the audience^[1]. Most of the previous research has focused on speech features in a single language or on macro-level rhetorical strategies, and few studies have been carried out to compare the internal systems of the interpersonal metafunction in different languages. Based on a corpus of 30 TED talks with corresponding themes in Chinese and English (covering the four main topics of technology, education, psychology and social innovation, with 15 talks in each language per topic), this paper examines the differences in the specific operating patterns of mood, modality and appraisal resources to reveal the different linguistic paths taken by the two languages to achieve the same communication goals. Therefore, we have obtained some new knowledge on the patterns of cross-cultural verbal interaction and provided new empirical data for comparative studies in Systemic Functional Linguistics.

1. Theoretical Foundation of the Interpersonal Metalinguistic Function and Cross-linguistic Contrastive Dimension

1.1 Main Contents of Interpersonal Metacommunication and its Interactive Negotiation Mode

According to Systemic Functional Linguistics, the main expression of the interpersonal function is in the two subsystems of Mood and Modality; the former specifies the dialogue structure of different

roles in communication, and the latter regulates the negotiability of propositions. TED Talks are a type of presentation that is one-way, but there is still a high demand for interaction; therefore, speakers use a mood system to assume that the audience will respond, and by varying the degree of modalisation and modulation, they can flexibly control the certainty of their views and the strength of the recommended actions. This type of interactive negotiation is a change in the rules of speaking under the authority of semantic negotiation; although the speakers need to lead the presentation of information, they should also leave some space for the audience to relate to it or question it, thus creating an informative yet interactive communication environment^[1].

In terms of the operation of negotiation mechanisms, the core of the interpersonal metafunction is to constantly switch between Subject and Finite to alternate among speech functions such as statements, questions and proposals. Although the clauses have some experience, they are still far from the audience in terms of power distance and psychological distance. Frequent use of the first-person plural subject can create a sense of group identity and shared responsibility, and a large number of modal auxiliary verbs affect the level of trust listeners have in the truthfulness of propositions. Knowing how this mechanism works will provide a foundation for the next two topics I will introduce: the Mood System and the Appraisal System. The choice of the person in the Subject directly affects how explicit or implicit the attribution of responsibility is, and the tense and modality markers in the Finite determine the proximity of the proposition to reality; together, they set the tone for each round of semantic exchange^[2].

1.2 Similarities and Differences in Linguistic Resources for Encoding Interpersonal Meaning in Chinese and English Contexts

Chinese and English have different grammatical and lexical resources for expressing interpersonal relationships, so there are also different interactional styles in TED talks in the two languages. English has a strict subject-verb agreement rule and a rich system of modal auxiliary verbs (such as can, may, should), so it can express all kinds of degrees of possibility, obligation and will. Chinese does not have a regular morphosyntax system, and many of its inter-personal relations are expressed by modal adverbs (e.g., yexu 'perhaps', yinggai 'should'), sentence-final particles (e.g., ba, ne, ma), and lexical modal expressions. Due to the lack of resources, speakers of the two languages will have to regulate themselves and motivate the audience in different ways.

Grammatical differentiation is not the only way interpersonal meaning is expressed in Chinese and English; other pragmatic norms also apply. Generally speaking, English TED Talks are more in a conversational style and frequently use modal expressions and interrogative sentences to reduce the sense of authority of one-way statements. Modesty, hesitation, certainty and other emotions are often expressed in Chinese speech through changes in intonation and the addition of modal particles; thus, context and inference by listeners frequently play an important role. Although they have some similarities and differences, none are superior to the others; rather, they are various choices for how the two language systems can achieve the same communication goals, and one should be able to distinguish between them for cross-linguistic comparison.

1.3 Analytical Levels and Operational Pathways for Cross-linguistic Comparison of the Interpersonal Metalinguistic Function

Before comparing the languages, one should set a certain level for the analysis in advance. The three stages of the area of interpersonal function proposed in this paper are as follows: First, there is the Mood system, which studies the distribution frequency and shift pattern of speech functions such as declarative, interrogative and imperative; Second, there is the Modality system, which analyzes the linguistic forms and gradation distributions of both modalisation and modulation; Finally, the Appraisal system will focus on attribution, intensity and accommodation of attitudinal resources. At each level, the analysis should start with linguistic forms and then be extended to include the construction of interpersonal meaning.

The two kinds of operating procedures in this paper are functional annotations and qualitative comparisons. According to the annotation framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper identifies and categorises mood features, modal expressions and evaluative lexis in the Chinese and English TED talk texts, respectively, and then counts the frequency of occurrence, combination patterns and distribution patterns of each subcategory of resources at the three levels. The purpose of this comparison is to show how all the different linguistic resources can achieve the same interactional goal:

to make the audience feel and understand something in a short period. There are many levels and types of comparison, so this paper will systematically study the differences and similarities in the construction of interpersonal meaning^[2].

2. The Mood System as a Regulatory Device in Chinese and English TED Talks

2.1 Role Differentiation of Subject and Finite in Constructing Speaker Stance

The pair relationship of the subject and the finite verb determines the type of speech function for a clause, and thus creates a certain distance between the speaker and the audience in TED talks. Strict inversion rules are employed in English to distinguish between declarative and interrogative sentences; regular subject-predicate structures are used to present some information, and tense and modality markers are placed in the finite part to indicate the certainty of the proposition. Chinese, on the other hand, does not have separate morphological features for the finite, and the selection of a subject is more dependent on topic-chain coherence and context; thus, speakers can omit subjects or use unmarked word order to create a loose but more inclusive stance space. The two structures differ in that the position of English-speaking people is relatively fixed and obvious, whereas that of Chinese speakers is more flexible and situation-dependent.

In terms of the function of stance construction, the selection of the Subject and the gradation configuration of the Finite work together to regulate the speaker's discursive authority and group-belonging connotations. The first-person singular subject is often used with weak modal finite verbs, such as "may" or "could", to reduce the force of one's own assertion and present the finding as an uncertain observation; at the same time, a first-person plural subject can attract the attention of the audience by appealing to a sense of common experience. Chinese often leaves out the subject and uses context to show who is responsible, so one does not need to mention their own position. The different operating modes of Subject and Finite in the two languages show that they have different ways of dealing with the demands for stance regulation in unidirectional communication.

2.2 Differentiated Mobilisation of Audience Participation by Interrogatives and Imperatives

TED Talks do not use interrogative sentences to present new knowledge; rather, they are employed rhetorically to guide the audience's thinking in a particular direction based on what the speaker has just presented. Interrogatives in English often take the form of tag questions or self-posed and self-answered questions; they can create a short sense of suspense to make listeners want to fill in the missing information and thus simulate an interactive path for dialogue in their minds. Chinese interrogative sentences, on the other hand, are more frequently followed by modal particles that express a question or uncertainty, and they are accompanied by a rising intonation to show that one has been invited to answer, even if it is not expected that an answer will be given verbally. Both languages have question words to prevent the spread of information in an uncritical manner; however, English is generally more logical-deductive in its intellectual guidance, and Chinese is relatively more emotional and participatory^[3].

Imperatives have a different function in motivating people to participate; that is to say, they aim to inspire a will to act rather than to give direct orders. Imperatives in English often use the base form of a verb (e.g., Imagine, Consider) to have the audience think, and they generally have a direct tone but their content tends to be abstract. Imperatives in Chinese often have mitigating words such as "qǐng" (please) or "ràng" (let) at the beginning, or use suggestive expressions like "bùfāng..." (might as well...) to reduce the force of the imperative. Interrogatives are more likely to promote cognition than imperatives are to motivate behaviour at the level of behavioural intention. English-speaking people use the two kinds of sentences at a relatively even rate, but Chinese speakers are more likely to use interrogatives to create a sense of interaction, and their use of imperatives is limited and often accompanied by polite expressions.

3. Gradational Features of Modalization and Modulation in Expressing Certainty and Obligation

3.1 Gradational Features of Modalisation: Cross-linguistic Calibration Strategies for Certainty Expressions

Modality is the degree of certainty of a particular statement; it can be high or low. As shown in the

TED Talks, the speakers have been at various levels of confidence in their ideas over time. Modal auxiliary verbs in English are used to create an ordered series of modality, ranging from high-certainty expressions (must, will) to low-certainty expressions (may, might), and thus it is possible to continuously and quantitatively adjust the degree of certainty in speech. Therefore, English-speaking people can directly express their judgment on the weight of the evidence for a proposition without using non-verbal cues.

Chinese does not have an ordered set of modal auxiliary words; instead, it uses combinations of modal adverbs (such as "definitely", "probably" and "perhaps"), sentence-final modal particles (which can express tentativeness or emphasis), and other context-coordinated ways to achieve the same expression of degrees. Gradational expressions in Chinese are generally pragmatic and subjective; high certainty is often shown by words such as "of course" and "without a doubt", and low certainty is expressed with "possibly" and the tentative particle, as well as a drop in intonation. Therefore, Chinese speakers are more likely to be euphemistic and indirect in their non-absolute statements compared with English speakers, and the boundaries of gradation are also more subject to change due to interactive circumstances and audience comprehension.

3.2 Gradational Features of Modulation: Cross-cultural Pragmatic Differences in Obligation Regulation

Modulation is to change the need and reasons for a person to behave in a certain way by adjusting the strength of the urge to act in speech. English has set up an explicit gradient of obligation in the obligation-value hierarchy of modal auxiliaries (must > should > could > might); high-value expressions are binding commands, and mid- and low-value expressions give the listener some choices. TED Talk speakers usually give direct advice and have a relatively high degree of modulation in their language to offer quick cognitive help; their logic is often close to that of "explicit instruction".

Chinese has a different kind of change. Chinese grammar has set up a hierarchy of restrictions, from the basic modal auxiliary words ('should', 'ought to' and 'may') and modal particles and syntactic ellipsis, to weak suggestions. It should also be pointed out that Chinese speakers often reduce the imperative force by omitting the subject (e.g., "should be noted" instead of "you need to know") or by adding softening expressions (e.g., "can be done"), thus maintaining an even dialogue relationship with the listeners. Based on the above comparison, English TED Talks are generally more direct and have higher value; therefore, they are more likely to be selected as the required materials for expressing modulation. All of the above gradational orientations are probably due to different acceptances of expressions of authority, interpersonal distance in public discourse, and listener autonomy in the two language cultures^[4].

4. Attitudinal Presentation of the Appraisal System in Chinese and English TED Talks

4.1 Differences in Chinese-English Preferences and Intensity of Affect Resources for Expressing Personal Experience

Affect resources refer to people's emotions in response to events or things, and they are often used in TED Talks to make the audience feel something. English-speaking people tend to use explicit affective words, such as happy, sad and frustrated, to directly express their emotions, and these expressions are relatively evenly distributed in intensity, ranging from low intensity (interested) to high intensity (terrified). Chinese-speaking people tend to be more reserved in expressing their emotions; they often use metaphors or describe situations indirectly, such as saying "I feel very uneasy in my heart" instead of using abstract emotion words. Therefore, the difference is that the effect of English transmission can be more direct and obvious, while for Chinese, expression needs to be understood in light of the surrounding context. Therefore, the two languages differ in the degree of explicit and implicit use of affective resources.

English-speaking people are more likely to use high-intensity expressions frequently in their language; this is especially true when talking about personal difficulties or achievements, as they tend to use strong emotional expressions in such cases. Chinese speakers often add words to change the degree, such as "somewhat" or "a little bit", to the same experience when talking about it, or add softening particles after emotional expressions to reduce the strength of assertion. The difference in preference is not due to a lack of ability, but rather reflects different norms for expressing emotion in the two languages. The peaks of affect resources in English TED Talks are generally located at the

narrative climax; in Chinese talks, they are distributed and often have several mitigating words, so the curve of emotional intensity is relatively flat.

4.2 Functional Differentiation of Social Dignity Orientation and Capacity Orientation in Judgement Resources

Judgement resources are used to judge people's behaviour and character, and in TED Talks, these generally fall into the two categories of social dignity orientation and capacity orientation. Social dignity orientation is one's conformity to the norms and values of a group; English-speaking people often use words such as "integrity" and "honesty" to judge others, and they are generally more concerned about meeting social expectations in their behaviour. Chinese-speaking speakers also mention dignity-oriented evaluation, but they tend to do so only in certain situations or within networks of relationships and do not separate the labelling of individuals from fixed tags. Direction of ability refers to a person's ability or talent to achieve a goal; assessment of ability in English often takes the form of direct adjectives such as 'smart' or 'talented', but in Chinese, evaluations of ability are frequently indirect and expressed through descriptions of behaviour (e.g., "this person is good at generating ideas")^[5].

The two Orientations of TED Talks have different functions and are used in different ways to build the speaker's authority. The purpose of social dignity judgment is to create a good image for people or to gently point out bad behaviour; the goal of capacity judgment is to make the audience believe in a particular view or way of behaving. English-speaking people have a relatively small difference in the frequency of use of social dignity and capacity-oriented resources, and often use them alternately in their stories. Chinese-speaking speakers are more concerned about orientation; the frequency of capacity judgment resources is much higher than that for social dignity judgment, and the targets of capacity evaluation are mainly themselves or their collective representatives, not third parties. The above differences show that "trustworthiness" is constructed differently in the two linguistic-cultural contexts; that is to say, it refers to moral integrity and norm compliance in the former, but practical ability and results orientation in the latter.

Conclusion

Systematically compare the realisation of the interpersonal metafunction in Chinese and English TED talks at the three levels of the Mood system, Modality system and Appraisal system. Based on the analysis above, English-speaking people generally use more explicit grammatical tools (such as modal auxiliary words and inverted sentences) and clear gradations to regulate their attitude and participation in conversation, and they also have a relatively separate division of dialogic spaces. Chinese-speaking students, on the other hand, tend to use implicit language in their expressions of emotion and control over their own speech, such as modal particles, subject ellipsis and contextual inference. The two languages also have systematic differences in the distribution and direction of the use of affect and judgement resources. Based on the above results, cross-linguistic comparisons of the interpersonal metafunction should not be restricted to a list of features but should also investigate how different linguistic resources are used to achieve the same interactional goals. In the future, more research will be carried out on other kinds of oral communication (such as academic lectures and podcast conversations), and empirical data on audience comprehension and feedback will be collected to determine whether different encodings of the interpersonal metafunctions actually result in different communication effects.

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