

Pragmatic Function of Negative Mitigation of Interactions in Online Talent Show: A Case Study of *the Birth of an Actor*

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Abstract: This article investigates the dynamic relationship between negation and interpersonal communication with a special interest in the interpersonal pragmatic functions of negative mitigation. The online talent show—*The Birth of an Actor* (named as *I am An Actor* from season two)—totals two seasons composed of 30 episodes, among which, 39 rounds of conversations are collected to fulfill this research. This paper invites research methods as recognizing, encoding, analyzing and induction to probe into the interpersonal pragmatic functions of negative mitigation in online talent show. Three findings of this research are that negative mitigation functions firstly, to mitigate blame, secondly, mitigate questions, thirdly, mitigate objections that demonstrates addressors' ability of resolving online conflicts with regard to interpersonal pragmatics.

Keywords: Negation; Mitigation; Interpersonal pragmatics; Online talent show interaction

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1 Introduction

Negation is a speech act used to demonstrate objection, refutation and the alike, with different pragmatic variants. Traditionally, the social pragmatic function of negation was considered as the negative, un-cooperative way of dealing with interpersonal relationship. It was classified as a negative face-threatening speech act^[1,2]. However, the interpersonal and dynamic function of negation in dealing with interpersonal

dynamic relationship has been underexplored^[3,4]. As proved in Ran, some negation structure in Chinese resolves face-threatening conflicts in its own right in the manner of guiding addressee to accept criticism, blame or complain from their interlocutor^[5]. Therefore, the working of negation in managing interpersonal relationships is worth pondering.

The current study has two objections: one is to explore interactions between judges in the online talent show *The Birth of an Actor*; discussing interpersonal pragmatic effects generated by the employment of negation. Another is to define how negation functions as a mitigator in managing interpersonal relationship.

2 Literature Review

Some interpersonal pragmatic studies have shown that negation is characterized as negative speech act. However, its function is defined by the manner that the addressors make use of it, in other words, the communicative context and interpersonal relationship between the two parties. The addressors can demonstrate attitude with either explicit negative words or indirect expressions and euphemisms to show negative attitude, opinions or emotions^[3]. In conflict context, the addressors possibly lead the conversation to two directions. One is to accelerate the conflict and break interpersonal relationship, the other is to mitigate the negative response, alleviate the opposition and enhance interpersonal relationship^[6]. In other words, the pragmatic function of negation embedded in the weakening or strengthening of negation employed by the addressor to mediate face-threatening effects caused by negation^[7].

Researches have set foot in the relationship between pragmatic meaning of negation and its literal meaning and landed on the conclusion that they were not necessarily equal to each other, simultaneously, it represents the addressor's deconstruction of interpersonal relationship including the addressor's comprehension and judgements to the interlocutor. It bears social function. Different degree of negation has different aftermath in line with the change of communicative context and interpersonal relationship^[8]. In online interaction, the form of live show brings greater challenges of face-threatening to interlocutors and at the same time, the addressee is enabled to take greater control over the employment of negative expressions in terms of interpersonal pragmatics.

Under the condition of online live show, people talking with each other become more of face-to-face communication instead of recite what is on the scripts as the way before, therefore, stronger sense of interpersonal pragmatic characteristics entered into such communication. On the one hand, judges in online talent show interact with each other instantly, and answer questions from candidates on spot; on the other hand, like face-to-face interaction easily trigger conflicts between parties in a conversation, being face-threatening for press media^[9], interactions among judges may also be face-threatening to each other. When a judge comments candidates with negative expressions, if not appropriately, arises doubts, objections even challenges from other judges and candidates, which increases the possibilities of face-threatening and spoils harmonious online interaction relationships^[10]. Therefore, in online live talent show judges incline to use variable, mitigatory, negotiatory way of expression so as to avoid face-threatening from candidates and other judges.

It is safe to say that the adoption of negation is more than the addressor's stance of negation, the comprehension of the presupposition of negation, the addressee's identity, the aftermath of negation and subjective evaluation are also included^[7]. Grounded by previous studies, the current study has paid special attention to mitigatory functions of negation from interpersonal pragmatic perspective in the fashion of discourse analysis of interactions between judges in the show with the purpose of investigating firstly, interpersonal pragmatic effects generated by the employment of negation; secondly, how negation functions as a mitigator in managing interpersonal

relationship.

3 Methods

3.1 Discourse analysis

With the aid of computer-mediated discourse analysis, this paper starts from discourse structure and reconstruct dynamic discourse sequence followed by the recognition, encoding, analysis and induction of the interactions between judges so that the way that negative expression delivered can be classified into three categories: explicit negative marker^[11]; adverbs with negative hedges and transitional words; negative interrogatives^[7].

4 Findings and discussion

Driven by the purposes of figuring out interpersonal pragmatic effects produced by the usage of negation and defining how negation functioned as a mitigator in managing interpersonal relationship, and with the help of discourse analysis, this paper surveyed interpersonal pragmatic functions of negation of interactions in the show, paying particular attention to negative mitigation and homed in three mitigatory functions of negation, namely, function of relieving blame; function of resolving questions and function of alleviating objection.

4.1 Function of mitigating blame

Blames from judges generates the most serious interpersonal conflicts, with explicit criticism in the judgements. Under the condition that judges hold different opinions on a performer's (or candidate's) performance and object to each other, they directly threatened the face of both the judges with opposite opinions and that of the candidates. Direct negation easily widens the gap between two interlocutors, from which pragmatic de-empathy derives^[12]. Therefore, in the interactions in online live talent show, any addressors involved in this scenario tends to employ vague language to mitigate the negation so as to achieve a harmonious effect of the show.

(1)01Q: *Why are you satisfied?*

→ 02A: Don't you know why I was satisfied?

→ 03Q: Zheng Shuang has burst into an undue laughter during a performance, why did you say that she has done a good job ?

→ 04A: You blamed he just because she selected the episode that you performed when you were at the age

of 18. I think her performance was excellent!

→ 05Q: You don't know what is acting at all! This kind of training was a routine for our acting major, look at what they were doing!

→ 06A: No, I don't agree at all. (snapped his phone)

→ 07Q: What else can you do except snapping your phone?

→ 08A: Taking off my shoes! (snapped his shoes on the table)

→ 09Q: (Threw away his shoes)What brought you here? You are not a qualified judge at all!

→ 10A: A man of virtue never fights.

→ 11Q: You took off your shoes first.

→ 12A: I do think that you have had a prejudice against Zheng Shuang. You've been too tough on her...

(the questioner is judge Zhang Ziyi=Z, female; the answerer is judge Liu Ye=L, male.)

Example 1 indicates that negative mitigation performs the function of mitigating blame. For instance, negations started with "You don't know", and questions began with "What else can you do", "Why did you" demonstrated blame and negation from the questioner. Under this condition, the answerer realized questioner's intention. By saying that "don't you know..." the answerer reacted to the questioner's challenge with another question to guide the questioner to reflect herself. L used "I think", "I don't agree", "I do think" to alleviate face-threatening effects to Z and snapped his phone to shift the focus of the following discussion, simultaneously, manifested his opposite stance. Judge L employed humor like snapping his phone and taking off his shoes to refuse judge Z's imposing her idea on him, and at the same time, by saying "A man of virtue never fights" to avoid threatening of her positive face. On the other hand, he brought forward his stance after Z throwing away his shoes by which her anger boiled away, in so doing offered rationality to his hidden negative stance^[13]. Given that negative negation generates direct face-threatening effects, L's response aimed at mitigating negative effects and obtain support from other listeners as well as his willingness to continue this conversation.

4.2 Function of mitigating questions

In this online talent show, questioning differs from blaming in that blaming is likely to target another judge holding different opinions, while questioning aims at the candidates whose performance evokes questions from the judge. In the following example, the frequent

usage of personal pronoun "you" demonstrates the questioning of performance of the candidate from the judge. In such context, any direct negation possibly triggers conflicts between judges who divides in the performance of the candidate. Therefore, the answerer employed "listen to me", "I think", "certainly not" to mitigate negation so as to refrain from a new round of questioning. At the same time, a third-party judge joined and shifted the topic from potential conflict to humorous conversation.

(2) 01Q: *Firstly, I really appreciate your performance, but I haven't been touched. ... I expected your taking out something importance from it but you just took out a pile of clothes and threw them away. Why did you do that? What's the story behind? Xu Lu, do you know that she would come here?*

→ 02A: I don't know.

→ 03Q: Weren't you surprised by her unexpected coming? Your best friend came to her boyfriend's home and you were there, if I were you I would be shameful... And that's why I don't think you really understand the psychological activities of the protagonist....but you really didn't know what you were acting.

→ 04C1: Let me tell you, I completely disagree with you at all! Kan Qingzi, I think your performance was marvelous! I was attracted by your performance from the very beginning, ... You could handle your role, you've been in the right pace all the time.

→ 05Q: She couldn't sit down if she had psychological support.

→ 06C1: I think she should have a seat and wait and see what's going on there.

→ 07Q: I don't think so.

→ 08C1: But I was really fascinated by her performance. Her crying was touching and infectious.

→ 09Q: Infectious?

→ 10C1: I can tell it from her performance.

→ 11Q: Look, I said that I was appreciate their emotions invested in the performance.

→ 12C1: But listen to me, in the performance of these two roles...

→ 13Q: The thing is whether her emotion was in the role or not.

(the questioner: Zhang Ziyi=Z, female; the answerer: Xu Lu=XL, female; the commentator: Xu Zheng=X, male)

Example 2 demonstrates that negative mitigation resolves questions. X did not retort Z directly, instead,

he used mitigatory expressions such as “I don’t agree”, “listen to me”, “I didn’t say” to combine negation structure and meta-discourse and increase its vagueness in order to gain support from the listener. From which we can see that negative mitigation strategies not only facilitates X to maintain politeness, but to avoid positive face threatening of the questioner A. Its purpose was in encouraging the third party to acknowledge his opinions.

4.3 Function of mitigating objections

Employing indirect negation in response to opposite opinions enjoys minimum degree of conflicts and boasts the highest degree of politeness in forms of interrogation. For one thing, the judge comments in line with the maxim of quality offering authentic information; for another, the addressee tried his best to adjust even change objective attitude and turn to positive speech acts when encountered disagreement or opposite opinion from the questioner.

(3) 01Q: Look, I said that I was appreciate their emotions invested in the performance.

→ 02A: But listen to me, in the performance of these two roles...

→ 03Q: The thing is whether her emotion was in the role or not.

→ 04A: It was definitely in the performance of the role, Kan Qingzi developed her own way of letting out her feelings.

→ 05C1: Hey, Xu, calm down, calm down, after all, we are men...

→ 06A: Uncle Wu, you go and watch the movie first.

→ 07Q: We cannot understand all episodes by watching the whole movies.

→ 08A: Certainly not, that’s not the case. Regardless of the movie itself, based on their age, I judge their performance only by whether they have devoted their emotions into their performance. Ok, let’s stop here and let it go.

→ 09C: What’s the difference between your comments and mine?

→ 10A: Why did you shift your stance to the opposite. You flip-flopper.

→ 11C: No, no, I meant that we two are men, so we should be gentlemen.

→ 12A: Your sudden “surrender” has running out of my faith in you.

→ 13C: Hahaha...

→ 14A: *You went back on your promise.*

(the questioner: Zhang Ziyi=Z, female; the answerer:

Xu Zheng=X, male; the commentator: Wu Xiubo=W, male)

Example 3 illustrates that negative mitigation avoids objection. To be specific, X did not directly retort Z’s objection, he elaborated his own opinion and demonstrated that the candidate had her own way of acting, in this way, he sought support from the other judge as well as the audience. It bridged the gap between two parties of a conversation, maintaining the face of the listener. It brought us to the conclusion that negation is more than the objective or opposite stance of the addresser. Meanwhile, it is responsible to resolve potential conflicts of online communication. In interactions of live online talent show, conflicts among judges were mostly triggered by different viewpoints towards candidates’ performance and embodied as objection and question. The addressee chose the most proper negative expression in accordance with personal relationship between the two parties of a conversation. Aiming at hiding the real intention, the interlocutors express their intention using words with strong subjectivity.

5 Conclusion

This paper started from interpersonal pragmatic function of negation, along with characteristics of online interactions, analyzed strategies that judges have taken in mitigating the potential conflicts generated by using negation. Communicative context and interlocutors in online live show differed from that of rebroadcast shows as before, which generated different requirements of pragmatic abilities. In interactions in online live talent show, judges intended possibly divide on a performance, therefore, the addressee inclined to employ indirect, mitigatory negation to cope with questions, objections even refutations. This indicated that judges were motivated to build a harmonious relationship within the online interaction group. This paper landed on the conclusion that negation is a speech act that mitigates blame, questions and objection.

This research modestly initiated a discussion on negation from interpersonal pragmatic perspective and shed light on discourse analysis under online communicative context. Further researches into interpersonal pragmatic function of negation is of sufficient interest and significance in that nothing would be sexier than digging out wisdom from daily life and giving it full play to facilitate human communication. Understanding of negative mitigation is a process

of constant drawing on data collected from human communication in class, at meetings, in the court and everyday life. And joint efforts of scholars are required so as to leave the research into negative mitigation a flourish field.

6 Limitations and future

This study provided a better understanding of mitigatory functions of negation. It manifests the following limitation, which can stimulate future research. First, as the sample of the present study was from two episodes of one single talent show, it was insufficient to conform the interpersonal pragmatic function of negative mitigation, therefore, further research would help confirm the casual interpersonal pragmatic function of negative mitigation.

Second, although the interpersonal functions of negative mitigation were proved through discourse analysis of interactions in the show, evidence from online talent show alone may limit the generalizability of the findings of the present study, because online talent show is a category of all shows and *The Birth of An Actor* is subcategory of all online talent shows. Concerning differences of different shows, including interviews, talk shows and so on and so forth, more work is needed to obtain a more representative sample in future research.

Third, the current study only examined the interpersonal pragmatic function of negation of judges in an online show, other parties like hosts, advisers and audiences were not involved in this scenario. Therefore, comparative study exploring the differences in the usage of negation between different parties in a show is worth examining.

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