

A Study of Identity Construction in Husband-wife Conflict Talk-A Case Study of Television Interview Program *Battle of Love*

Qiaoyan Ma

College of Foreign Languages, Xinjiang Normal University, Urumqi 830017, Xinjiang, China

Funding: Funded by Postgraduate Research & Practice Innovation Program of Xinjiang Normal University; Project Name: A Study of Identity Construction and the Use of Vocabulary Resources in Family Conflict Talk-A Case Study of Television Interview Program *Battle of Love*; Project number: XSY202001013.

Abstract: Based on Pragmatic Identity Theory, this study uses qualitative and quantitative research methods, and analyzes the conflict talk corpus collected from the television interview program *Battle of Love*, and investigates the identity construction and the use of linguistic resources in husband-wife conflict talk. The results show that in the conflict talk, the two sides of conflicts construct self-identity, the other party's identity, and the third party's identity. In these three types of identities, the most frequently constructed identity is the other party's identity, followed by self-identity, and finally, the third party's identity.

Keywords: Husband-wife conflict talk, Identity construction, *Battle of Love*

Publication date: April, 2021; **Publication online:** 30 April, 2021

***Corresponding author:** Qiaoyan Ma, 1525160998@qq.com

1 Introduction

Conflict talk refers to the participants' disapproval utterances or actions in the exchange of turns, and it is also known as disputes, quarrels, arguments, and squabbles^[1]. Due to the negativity of conflict talk, it has not attracted enough attention in academic circles. It was not until the 1970s that conflict talk became the object of linguistic and anthropological research and has achieved fruitful results in recent years. Foreign scholars mainly focus on the language means of conflict talk. They study conflict talk in different contexts, including family conflict talk, children's conflict talk, and conflict talk in television interview programs. At the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese scholars began to pay attention to the study of conflict talk. The research perspectives include conversation analysis and cognitive linguistics, especially in family conflict talk, court conflict talk, and doctor-patient conflict talk. Although there have been great achievements in Chinese and Western studies, limited studies can not fully explain the interesting language phenomenon of conflict talk.

Family is established and maintained through verbal communication. Family is the cradle of language and an

important place for daily language communication^[2]. In recent years, with the development of China's economy and the change of people's ideas, family conflicts have become increasingly prominent, and become a social problem that needs attention. Therefore, it is an urgent need for the harmonious development of economic and social families to explore the current husband-wife conflict talk and put forward suggestions to solve the family conflict.

2 Conflict talk and identity

Grimshaw firstly came up with the concept of "conflict talk" in 1990. Conflict talk refers to the talk or behavior that participants disapprove of in turn-taking. Most of the conflict topics are about the identity and social relations of the participants. Conflict talk refers to the antagonistic speech acts and speech events, such as opposition, quarrel, argument, refutation, and insult, which occur between the communicative subjects in verbal communication^[3].

Identity refers to the core aspects of self and what everyone has^[4]. Pragmatic identity refers to the identity of the self or the other chosen by the language user intentionally or unintentionally in a specific communicative situation. It is the other identity of the social individual or group mentioned by

the speaker in the talk, which is different from the social identity of the communicators before they enter the communication^[5].

3 Identity construction in husband-wife conflict talk

According to the objects of the conflict subject's discourse construction, namely self-identity, other party's identity, and third party's identity, the number, and frequency of construction are shown in Figure 1, of which the construction of self-identity is 522 times, accounting for 36.10% of the total frequency of identity construction; the construction of other party's identity is 781 times, accounting for 54.01%; the construction of third party's identity is 143 times, accounting for 9.89%.

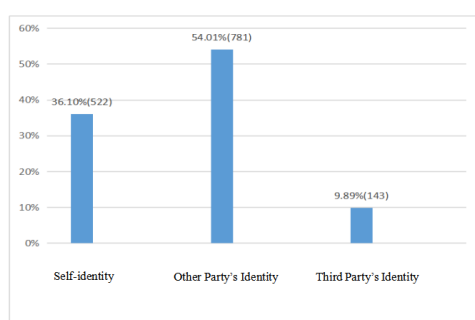


Figure 1. The proportion of different identities in the husband-wife conflict talk (N=1446)

From the overall frequency of the three identities, we can see that in the husband-wife conflict talk, the conflicting parties tend to construct the other party's identity first, then the self-identity, and finally the third party's identity.

As a conflict strategy and speech weapon, identity construction is used to directly or indirectly accuse the other party of dereliction of duty or negligence in some aspects. The two sides of the conflict, you come and I go, construct one or more identities of each other in turn. The construction of self-identity generally includes three situations: one is to express self-identity and defend the right of action or talk; the other is to praise and enhance one's own identity image, emphasizing efforts, dedication, and sacrifice, expressing dissatisfaction and condemnation to the other; the third is to construct self-identity passively. The construction of the third party's identity is not only aimed at the third party but also to meet the needs of the conflict, whose real goal is the other party^[6].

3.1 The construction of other party's identity

The construction of the other party's identity refers to the phenomenon that one party highlights, challenges, fabricates, deconstructs, or reconstructs the other party's identity through specific discourse practice^[7]. In the husband-wife conflict talk, the purpose and pertinence of constructing other party's

identity are evident and direct and act directly on the conflict process as a communication strategy or conflict strategy to achieve the purpose of criticizing, accusing, reprimanding, and even abusing each other, which fully embodies the characteristics of conflict talk communication.

(1) (Context: The wife complained that her husband did not do housework and lived a sloppy life.)

Wife: *Don't you do housework?* I can find your socks anywhere in the house.

Husband: I didn't mean to, did I. For people at work, how can they decorate so carefully, Right?

Wife: *Can't you just leave it in the bathroom for me to wash?*

Husband: *You're a full-time mom*, I'm a worker, and I can't be as careful and professional as you are, right.

(2019.08.21 Topic: If you don't change, we won't be able to live together.)

In example (1), the wife expresses dissatisfaction with her husband's behavior at home and criticizes her husband through emotional rhetorical questions. She uses "Don't you do housework?" and "Can't you just leave it in the bathroom for me to wash?" to accuse the husband of not doing housework, even make the house in a mess, construct the other party's identity of irresponsible and lazy living habits, to hope that the husband can make some change. In the following dialogue, the husband defends his behavior. He uses "You're a full-time mom" to make excuses for his behavior at home. At the same time, he constructs the other party's full-time mother's identity, suggesting that his wife's carefulness and professionalism are what she should do as a mother, while he, as a worker, is not so serious about his family and professional, which is justifiable. It can be seen that in this conflict talk situation, the two sides of the conflict construct each other's identities tit for tat, prompt each other's due identities and corresponding family responsibilities, express their expectations, and criticize each other's real behaviors.

3.2 The construction of self-identity

The construction of self-identity refers to the construction of self-identity by communicative subject through discourse practice. Since the emergence of essentialism to social constructivism, the default or main analysis object of identity discourse construction is the discourse construction of the speaker's self-identity^[8]. In the process of husband-wife conflict talk, conflict subjects will choose to construct self-identity. This construction may be conscious, strategic, or

unconscious.

(2) (Context: The husband is dissatisfied with his wife coming home late, while the wife thinks that she works for the family.)

Husband: We've been married for nineteen years. When our daughter was three years old, you went out early and came back late.

Wife: Why did *I* go out early and come back late? Didn't *I* do it for this family?

Husband: You for this family?

Wife: I'm a *salesman*. Can a *salesman* keep away from customers?

Husband: Then you should take care of this family! You're a woman. You have a husband and children.

Wife: *I*'ve taken care of it! *I* took care of the children, too! *I* didn't take care of it!

(2019.10.29 Topic: I want a warm family.)

In example (2), when the husband accuses his wife of "go out early and come back late", the wife says that everything she did was for the sake of their family. She uses the emotional identity reference "salesman" to remind her husband of her "salesman" identity. The wife timely constructs and highlights her status as a salesman because her husband accuses her of going out early and coming back late, but also doubts that what she does is for their family. Thus, she constructs a busy salesman identity for herself. As we all know, the working process of the salesperson is complex, with many details and long timelines. The wife wants to exchange her husband's understanding by letting him know his professional characteristics. In the following dialogue, the husband continually reminds the wife that she is a woman and has a husband and children. He thinks that his wife should take good care of her family. Later, the wife refutes her husband again, using the sentence "I've taken care of it! I took care of the children, too! I didn't take care of it!" to strongly attack her husband and construct mother and wife identity of being responsible for the family and children.

3.3 The construction of third party's identity

The third party's identity refers to the third party identity "mentioned" or "used" by the speaker in a specific utterance. The third party's identity mentioned in husband-wife conflict talk is often strongly related to one or both sides of the speaker or the hearer. The purpose of bringing the third party into the conflict conversation or constructing the third party's identity in the conflict talk is to express specific emotions in the process of conflict or quarrel, enhance the persuasiveness of

one's own discourse, and suppress and refute the other's views. Because most of the third parties are absent, there is little or no interference of social factors such as "face" or "politeness" between the two sides of the communication, so the way the speaker or the hearer constructs his or her identity always conveys important emotional information and communicative intention^[9].

(3) (Context: The husband took all the supplements to his mother, and the wife thinks that her husband only considers her mother and doesn't care about her.)

Husband: *My mother* is not well, let them mend her body.

Wife: Then you take it and don't ask, you have to leave me some!

Husband: We are young and in good health. It doesn't matter if we eat more or less.

Wife: Then you are facing *your mother*! That's what *my mother* gave me to mend my body. It's not that you can't take it. You can take part of it. You can take all of it. I must be angry. When *your sister* didn't come back, why didn't we move the chopsticks and put all the delicious food in *your sister*'s bowl for fear that she didn't eat the same?

(2019.10.10 Topic: Please consider more about our family.)

In example (3), the wife is dissatisfied because her husband gave all her supplements to her mother-in-law. In the conversation with her husband, she mentions three third-party's identities: mother, mother-in-law, and sister. From the actual content of the dialogue, this conflict talk is mainly around the mother-in-law and sister, so it is necessary to mention the mother-in-law and sister. However, she does not use the social conventionalized address, or the address that her husband expected: "mother" or "our mother", "sister" or "our sister", but uses "my mother", "your mother" and "your sister", reflecting a negative emotional orientation. This conveys the emotional distance between the wife and her mother-in-law and her husband and sister, which is alienated and hostile to a certain extent. The degree of recognition is not high. At the same time, it also widens the distance between the wife and her husband.

4 Summary

In the husband-wife conflict talk, the two sides of communication construct three different types of identities: self-identity, the other party's identity, and the third party's identity. In these three types of identities, the most frequently constructed identity is the other party's identity, followed by self-identity, and finally, the third party's identity. To construct the other party's identity is the most common

identity strategy in husband-wife conflict talk. As a conflict strategy and speech weapon, identity construction is used to directly or indirectly accuse the other party of dereliction of duty or fault in some aspect. The construction of self-identity generally includes three situations: one is to show self-identity and defend the right of action or discourse; the second is to praise and elevate one's own identity image, emphasize paying, sacrifice, and hard work, and compare with the other's identity to express dissatisfaction and condemnation of the other's actual behavior; the third is to construct self-identity passively. The construction of the third party's identity is often not merely aimed at the third party but to meet the needs of conflict, especially the collision's need. The real target is the other party. The construction of the third party's identity is either to defend the third party with the same position as itself or to attack the third party with the same position as the other party.

The construction of identity in the husband-wife conflict talk explored in this study may also be affected by gender, age, occupation, educational background, and values. These need to be further explored in the future.

References

- [1] Grimshaw, A. D. *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations in Conversation*[M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- [2] Tannen, D. Kendall, S. & Gordon, C. *Family Talk: Discourse and Identity in Four American Families*[M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007:3.
- [3] Ran YP. An Introduction to the Pragmatics of Conflict Discourse [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching*, 2010, 31(01):1-6.
- [4] Tracy, K. *Everyday Talk: Building and Reflecting Identities*[M]. New York: Guilford Press, 2002.
- [5] Chen XR. *New Course of Pragmatics* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Teaching and Research Press, 2009.
- [6] Guo YD. *Pragmatic Identity in Everyday Verbal Communication* [M]. Changchun: Jilin University Press, 2019.
- [7] Chen XR. Pragmatic Identity: Dynamic Selection and Discourse Construction [J]. *Foreign Language Studies*, 2013(4):27-32+112.
- [8] Kroskrity, P. Identity[J]. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, 2000(9):111-114.