

A Comparative Study of English and Chinese Impromptu Sports Commentaries: An Appraisal Analysis of “McGrady Time”^{*}

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This paper takes “McGrady Time” as research subject, employing appraisal theory in SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics) to make a cultural comparative study of the English and Chinese impromptu sports commentaries. It aims to find out different features of impromptu commentaries between these two languages and then analyze the deeply rooted reasons based on a comprehensive understanding of cultural dimensions, ethical thoughts in both English and Chinese. The result shows: (1) The number of words expressing attitude in the English version is far more than that of Chinese version, because Chinese culture advocates self-control and self-regulation while the Westerners believe in individualism; (2) There are more words describing mental process in the English version than that of Chinese one for Chinese people pay less attention to the psychological aspect of human being; (3) English version contains more negation and assertion, while the Chinese version contains more entertaining; and (4) The words used in the English version construe greater degrees of positivity or negativity than the Chinese version, which results from cultural and political factors in China and English countries. It is hoped that the present study can better understand the academic field of sports discourse and broaden the scope of the study of impromptu sports commentaries in the framework of SFL.

Keywords: impromptu sport commentaries, “McGrady time”, SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics), appraisal theory, cultural difference

Introduction

Appraisal theory, an important theory in SFL (Systemic Functional Linguistics), can be used to analyze a variety of discourses. As a special kind, impromptu sports commentary has its own features, like extemporization, excitement, and appeal. Up till now, there is no thesis analyzing sports discourse using appraisal theory. Live sports commentaries in China and Western counties are different in terms of language style, use of words, sentence patterns, tones, and effects due to a number of factors. This paper pays attention to the differences between the two versions of commentary, and analyzes how and why these differences occur through studying the live commentary of “McGrady Time”.

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, the framework of SFL is used. According to this theory, there are three basic functions of language: (1) making sense of our experience: the ideational metafunction; (2) realizing our social relationships:

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the interpersonal metafunction; and (3) constructing coherent and cohesive texts which relate in appropriate ways to the context of the text's production and reception: the textual metafunction (Halliday, 1985; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In particular, in this study, we deal with a key aspect of the interpersonal meaning of language: evaluation. In this domain, appraisal analysis, which is concerned with the linguistic resources that speakers or writers use to express, negotiate, and naturalize inter-subjective positions with their audience (Hood & Martin, 2007), identifies three main systems of evaluative meanings: attitude, graduation, and engagement (Hood & Martin, 2007; Martin & Rose, 2003; Martin & White, 2005). Briefly, attitude relates to feelings and opinions, graduation refers to the strength with which feelings and opinions are expressed, and engagement refers to the extent to which speakers or writers "engage" with ideas in order to align or distance themselves from their audience.

Subject Investigated

Impromptu Sports Commentary

Sport is one of those human activities that play significant roles in everyday life of people around the world, whether they are participants or just spectators and supporters of it. Today, sport has not only become great entertainment, useful recreation, and health promoting vehicle, but also can be used as a means to overcome social problems and as such is essential for social integration, inclusion, and cohesion in a modern society.

With the increasingly reforming and opening of China, the country is becoming stronger and stronger in politics, economy, culture, sport and so on. The Chinese people are now seeking for more spiritual enjoyment rather than material fortune alone. These demands are also reflected in sports fields and sport is taking on an increasingly national flavor. More and more people have the willingness to take part in athletics. Watching sports programs, especially sports competitions, have become very popular. Thus, professional sports channels have emerged as required, and there are about 40 sports TV channels broadcasting nearly 20 hours various sports programs every day on average. Among these programs, live transmission of sports competitions is audience's favorite due to its sense of timeliness, vividness, excitement, and suspensiveness, thus takes a considerable status in modern TV programs.

As the audiences keep their eyes on the TV screen, they can also hear one or two persons describing, commenting, and analyzing what is happening on the field at the same time. This form of sportscast is called impromptu commentary. By impromptu commentary, we mean the reporting of a sport with a voiceover describing the details of the action of the game in progress. The commentators have no prewritten script on in advance and must rely on only background information and previous records of the competitors. Their work is relatively fluid, unplanned, and full of individual features. On one hand, they must objectively describe the objective situation in the court for the audience as the event unfolds; on the other hand, they may add their own feelings, attitudes, commentaries, analyses, predictions, and other subjective opinions towards the players, teams, coaches, judgments, cheering squads, and even the spectators' clothes that are related to the game. Therefore, it can be said that the impromptu commentaries are culture-bound, because what the commentators say and how they say are strongly influenced by their background, way of thought, education, experiences, like and dislike, etc.

There are theses about discourse analysis using appraisal theory, among which very few are concerned with impromptu sports commentary resources and its characteristics. As part of sports language, impromptu sports commentary possesses distinctive features—extemporary, thrilling, and appealing. Without sports

commentary, there would not be so many sports fans staying up all night watching World Cup, NBA (National Basketball Association), and other exciting sports games, tournaments, and championships (LU, 2009). A good commentator can successfully arouse the enthusiasm inside the audiences, add sparkles to the game, and provide useful information helping viewers understand the situation.

McGrady Time

As analyzing language material, it is necessary to give general background information of “McGrady Time”. Tracy Lamar McGrady, Jr., (born May 24, 1979) is an American professional basketball player. When he played for Houston Rockets on December 9, 2004, he scored 13 points in the last 35 seconds of a game against the San Antonio Spurs, with four consecutive three pointers (one of which was part of a four-point play), including a steal and the game-winning three pointer with 1.7 seconds left in the game that helped the Rockets win 81-80. So this “35 seconds” in NBA history is called “McGrady Time”. It is exactly an exciting moment. Selecting this period as commentary language material possesses typicality which best reveals the nature of impromptu sports commentaries.

Discussion and Results

English Version

The author has selected some examples from the English impromptu commentary of “McGrady Time”, and analyzed them in terms of attitude, graduation, and engagement.

Example (1) Oh, Popovich is **seriously**, they **didn't** run the play that he designed and Manu Ginobili with a **dangerous** crossfall pass, nearly intercepted by Houston.

In Example (1), by using the adverbial “seriously”, and the adjective “dangerous”, the commentator makes a negative evaluation of the situation. From the perspective of affect, the emotional reaction of unhappiness and dissatisfaction is expressed with these two words (LI & GUO, 2011).

From the perspective of engagement, Example (1) is a bare negation (monoglossic) which presents the proposition as self-evident and unproblematic.

Example (2) And it **looks like** Gregg Popovich is **upset** with Manu Ginobili.

The verb “look like” presents the uncertainty of the assertion. So it is dialogistically expansive in terms of engagement. The adjective “upset” describes the mental process of the coach, and the affect is unhappy, which is negative.

Example (3) We **did not** get that play correct at the time out and Popovich **sharply seem upset** with Manu.

In Example (3), the negative affect was made through the adjective “upset”. “Upset” is quantified via an isolated term which modifies the graduated entity (sharply), which shows clearly the degree and sudden of upset. From the point of view of engagement, this formulation is a bare assertion, or negation, so the proposition is presented as unproblematic. The use of the first person plural presents the addresser as including the addressee, whose agreement is taken for granted.

In Examples (1)-(3), from the point of view of affect, the commentator all expresses his unhappiness, insecurity, and dissatisfaction. The emotion is revealed indirectly, via the description of the unhappy facial expressions of Spur's coach Gregg Popovich, words like “seriously” and “upset” are categorized into the words of mental process, which demonstrates the emphasis of mental or psychological aspects of people. Besides, the description of the coach represents the underlining of communication between the coach and the players.

Example (4) Wow, **what a** shot by McGrady! We see he's screened by Yao Ming, was forcing Duncan can't help. He just draws the contact and somehow let it to go, **incredible** shot by T-Mac!

The positive affect was made via exclamation "what a shot by McGrady". In the view of engagement, the adjective "incredible" reveals counter expectation of McGrady's performance. Therefore, it is dialogically contractive.

Example (5) It is **amazing**!

Example (6) Bowen not wants to pick up a foul, McGrady, **amazingly** somehow get it to go to keep point in (won) game.

Example (7) Tracy McGrady with an **incredible** performance down the straight, including a four point play.

Example (8) **Unbelievable!** Almost people who left smart, they drive home in their cars right now wondering what do we thinking.

The same as Examples (4)-(8), all express the affect of happiness, security, and satisfaction of Huston, which in turn shows the standpoint of the commentator on the side of Huston. In terms of judgment, they are all positive. As the use of "amazing", "amazingly", and "incredible", "unbelievable", the counter expectation are made, thus the sentences all belong to contracting dialogicity. As the voice of the commentator raised higher, with more enthusiasm when explaining, the comment limited other voice, making the audience and viewer feel enthusiastic and full of passion.

Example (9) Here comes McGrady, no timeout remaining, McGrady, **for the win**.

"For the win" shows the standpoint of the commentator, which is on the side of Huston. Because the words were claimed before the ball fell into the basket, when McGrady just throw the ball. So there is no conclusive result yet at that very time. But the commentator said it out which revealed the inclination of him. Where there should be a dialogical expansion with uncertainty, the commentator changed it into dialogical contraction, making the affect more direct and explicit.

Example (10) And it's **all** McGrady scoring the last 13 for rockets, 13points in 33 seconds.

In Example (10), the dialogical contraction is arrived through the adverbial "all", which attributed all of the success to McGrady.

Example (11) And he **never** had any doubt that he would get poll up from 3 and go for the win and **why not?**

In Example (11), it is a bare negation, as the adverbial "never" shows. There is a rhetorical question "why not?" in the sentence introducing propositions presented as obvious or self-evident. According to White (2003), this dialogically contracting meaning is an instance of one mode of proclamation: concurrence.

In Examples (9)-(11), the affects are all positive and direct, in terms of judgment, they are all positive as well, and are all dialogical contraction in terms of engagement. The three comments show the support of Huston of the commentator.

Based on the above analysis, the English version is more explicit in affect, and more subjective (negative to Spur, and positive to Huston). There are more description of the mental process of both coach and players. These reveal the adequate communication between the coach and the players. Besides, there are more dialogical contraction and less dialogical expansion, making the comment more engaging and thrilling, making the audience enthusiastic and full of passion.

Chinese Version

When "McGrady Time" was broadcasting in China, the commentator also had an impromptu commentary.

We selected several examples to analyze so as to do a comparison with the English version.

Example (12) mǎidì fēnqiú lái yí gè hái yǒu 5 fēn de chā jù hái shì yǒu huì.
麦蒂，3分球来一个，还有5分的差距，还是有机会。

McGrady scored another three, five points behind, Houston still has change.

Example (13) cǐ chù yīnggāi huǒjiàn duì yǐ jīng hǎoxiàng méiyǒu zǎngtíng le ma kànjiàoliàn zhǐ shì zài chǎng biān jiǎng yí jiǎng.
此处应该火箭队已经，好像没有暂停了吗？看教练只是在场边讲一讲。

Right now, it seems that, dose Houston has no timeout? Their coach is instructing along the court.

Example (14) 80 : 75 , 16.2 miǎo kànkanhuǒjiàn duì néng bù néng chū xiàn qíjì.
80 : 75 , 16.2 秒，看看火箭队能不能出现奇迹。

80: 75, 16.2 seconds left, let's see whether Houston can create a miracle.

Example (15) kěnéng yào chū xiàn qíjì de huà shǒuxī nǐ zhè bō jīngng yīdìng yào zài kuàisù de fēn.
可能要出现奇迹的话，首先这波进攻一定要最快速度去得分。

If want to make the miracle, they should first take an attack with fastest speed in order to score.

Example (16) zhèxià zǐ yào jìn běn zhōu shí dà hǎo qiú de jī huì mǎ dà de le.
这下子要进本周“十大好球”的机会蛮大的了。

Chances to enter “Top Ten” are pretty good.

Uncertainty is shown throughout the comment, and the dialogically expansive meaning results in the obscurity of emotion, which lacks of passion (see Examples 12-16). Especially Example (13), the use of question makes it more implicit. Not until the last moment of the final victory of Huston, the commentators kept using dialogically expansive sentences. Like Examples (17)-(18) below:

Example (17) zhēndemǎidì tài shénqí le!
真的麦蒂太神奇了！

McGrady is so amazing!

Example (18) fēicháng xìjù xìng.
非常戏剧性。

So dramatic!

Example (19) dèngkènháishì mǎncōng míng de yīnwéitā fáqiú bù wěn zhīdào yáo míng sùdù màn.....
邓肯还是蛮聪明的，因为他罚球不稳，知道姚明速度慢.....

Duncan is smart, he knows he's not good at penalty shot, and Yao Ming is slow...

Example (20) zhǐyào fájìn yí qiú jiù ràng duì fāng nán dù fēicháng gāo , xūyào shì liǎng gè 3 fēn qiú , dàn yào shì liǎng qiú dōu fájìn de huà ,
只要罚进一球就让对方难度非常高，需要是两个3分球，但要是两球都罚进的话，

nà duì yú mǎlì duì jiù shì zuì hǎo de jié guǒ le.
那对于马刺队就是最好的结果了。

Only one shot could make Houston hard, which needs two threes to catch up. But if they can make two, it is the best result for Spur.

In Examples (19)-(20), the commentator obviously took the stand on the Spur's side, while other comments show the support of Huston.

Based on the above analysis, the Chinese version is more objective, stands neither on the Huston's side nor the Spur's side. Moreover, there are less or even no words showing direct and explicit attitude, including

affect, judgment, and appreciation. And besides, emphasizing on the description of objective fact, the comment lacks of passion and enthusiasm.

Differential Analysis of the English and Chinese Version

Affect. The number of words expressing attitude in the English version are far more than that of Chinese version; there are more words describing mental process in the English version than that of Chinese one. Therefore, the Chinese version cannot successfully win the audiences' heart.

Engagement. English version contains more negation and assertion, while the Chinese version contains more entertaining. That is there are more dialogical contraction in English comments and more dialogical expansion in Chinese ones. Thus, the Chinese version lacks of passion, and fails to arouse the enthusiasm of the audiences.

Graduation. The words used in the English version construe greater degrees of positivity or negativity than the Chinese version. There are more amazing, incredible, and unbelievable, such words expressing counter expectation, thus add strength and passion to the comment.

Given the cultural background of China and the United States, the differences between the two versions are rooted in the following aspects: (1) Due to ingrained influence of Confucianism in China, every social member according to his or her social position should conduct and behave appropriately. Influenced by the doctrines of Li and Chung Yung, Chinese people tend to avoid going to extremes and emphasize the self-control and self-regulation in emotion (ZUO, 2007). Shouting in public and showing emotion excessively are considered as contrary to these principles. Thus, the Chinese commentators' acting moderately and relative rationally in sports commentaries is easily to be explained.

On the contrary, in America, Christianity advocates the individualism which tends to express emotion more freely than people from collectivist cultures, particularly for outwardly directed emotions like excitement and cheerfulness. That is why American commentators always shout and exclaim when they feel exciting.

(2) Basketball originated from the USA not spreading in China until recent decades. So it is not a traditional sport of China. Therefore, it is understandable that Chinese commentators fall behind American commentators both in emotion and skill.

(3) Chinese people pay less attention to the psychological aspect of human being than the Western nation, which leads to the difference mentioned above that there are more words describing mental process in the English version than that of Chinese one (ZUO, 2007).

(4) Politics is another factor in deciding the differences. China has stricter control on politics, allowing no sensitive wording in comments. The "commentary affair" of the famous commentator HUANG Jian-xiang proved it well. Therefore, the Chinese commentators are more prudent and careful in impromptu sport commentaries, resulting in less emotional and subjective comments.

(5) That very game in which "McGrady Time" happened is a home game for Huston against Spur. Thus, it is not uncommon for commentators to stand on Huston's side.

Conclusions

Under the framework of an appraisal analysis, this paper focuses on differences between Chinese and English sports impromptu commentaries of "McGrady Time" and their deeply rooted cultural reasons. The major findings are listed as follows: (1) The number of words expressing attitude in the English version are far

more than that of Chinese version. This is because Chinese culture advocates self-control and self-regulation while the Westerners believe in individualism; (2) There are more words describing mental process in the English version than that of Chinese one. Chinese people pay less attention to the psychological aspect of human being than the Western nation which was proved by the time when psychology appears in the two nations; (3) English version contains more negation and assertion, while the Chinese version contains more entertaining; and (4) The words used in the English version construe greater degrees of positivity or negativity than the Chinese version. The third and fourth findings are the results of cultural and political factors in China and English countries.

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