

A Corpus-Based Analysis of the Interpersonal Function in ESL Students' Oral English in Terms of Modality

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Modal discourse markers play an important role in language communication, and the analysis of modal discourse markers is in full swing, but a large amount of analysis focuses on written texts, such as academic writing or celebrity speeches, and few studies on the actual use of L2 learners. This study is conducted based on the theoretical framework of interpersonal meaning in Halliday's functional grammar, and analyzes the dialogue in the multi-modal spoken corpus of science and engineering college students from the perspective of modality, hoping to provide reference for L2 learning and teaching.

Keywords: modality System, L2 pragmatic ability, interpersonal function, modal discourse marker

Introduction

Systemic functional linguistics was founded by M. A. K. Halliday in the late 1950s and has evolved a lot over the past half century (Huang, 2000). The interpersonal function of language is one of the three major functions in the systemic functional linguistics framework. It refers to people's use of language to express the interaction between the two parties, which expresses the identity, attitude, motivation and role of the communicator in the interaction. Language is used to influence others, or expresses the speaker's opinions about the world and even changes the external world (Halliday, 2000, p. 624). M. A. K. Halliday created the three metafunctions, i.e., ideational, interpersonal, and textual functions. The functional grammar has been adopted for discourse analysis of different kinds of texts including advertisements (Yang, 2018; Wang, 2018), political texts (Wang, 2019), news report (Liu, 2019), medical articles (J. Gu, X. M. Gu, & Sun, 2019) and academic papers (Yan, 2017). Despite the abundant results achieved by researchers focusing on written texts, not enough concentration has been made to spoken English and not to mention the spoken English of L2 learners.

Therefore, this paper tries to apply the modality system from the systematic functional grammar to interpret the spoken English uttered by Chinese university students. The purpose of this study is to reveal how the different modality types are utilized in the daily utterances of the Chinese L2 students. The study aims to answer the following questions: (1) How are different modality orientation types distributed in the daily spoken utterances? (2) Which kind of modal operators do L2 speakers prefer in the daily spoken utterances according to their value? The goal of this study is to better understand the speaker's standpoint and the hidden value and purpose of the utterances, and further reveal how the speaker's intention is successfully delivered through the linguistic features.

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Theoretical Foundation

In people's daily communication, language plays an important role in establishing and maintaining social relations between people. Interpersonal function is mainly embodied in two aspects: mood system and modality system. Halliday (1994) argued that no matter how communicative roles change, the basic tasks are given and required. The objects of communication are goods and services, or information. Communicative roles and exchanges constitute the main speech functions: providing, commanding, stating, and asking questions. From the perspective of grammatical structure, statements, questions, and commands are realized by the declarative mood, interrogative mood, and imperative mood respectively.

Interpersonal function is mainly realized by mood system and modality. This paper will focus on applying the modality system to analyze L2 speakers' daily talk in order to find out how do the speakers realize the interpersonal function and provide implications and feedback to the L2 speakers. As Halliday (1994, p. 356) explained, "Modality refers to the area of meaning that lies between yes and no—the interediate ground between positive and negative polarity". According to systemic-functional linguists, different modal expressions can illustrate the speaker's judgment on the success and validity of the proposition expounded by himself, or require the other party to assume corresponding obligations in the command, or express his or her own inclination in the proposal. Halliday (1994, p. 89) divided modality type into modalization and modulation, which is manifested by probability, usuality, obligation, and inclination respectively. Besides, the interpersonal function of modality is also expressed by orientation and value, which will be discussed further in this paper. Modal orientation can be classified into four categories: explicit subjective, explicit objective, implicit subjective, and implicit objective. As shown in Table 1, explicit subjective and explicit objective modality orientations are presented in the form of projective clauses expressing mental processes and relational (or verbal) processes respectively, which contain grammatical metaphors. The modal orientations of implicit subjective and implicit objective are mainly expressed in the form of restrictive modal operators and modal appendices.

Table 1

Modality Orientation

| | Subjective: explicit | Subjective: implicit | Objective: implicit | Objective: explicit |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Modalization: probability | I think Mary knows | Mary'll know | Mary probably knows | It's likely that Mary knows |
| Modalization: usuality | | Fred'll sit quite quiet | Fred usually sits quite quiet | It's usual for Fred to sit quite quiet |
| Modulation: obligation | I want John to go | John should go | John's supposed to go | It's expected that John goes |
| Modulation: inclination | | Jane'll help | Jane's keen to help | |

Note. Source: Hallidy (1994, p. 358).

The third variable in modality is the value that is attached to the modal judgment: high, median, or low (Halliday, 1994, p. 358). Here we will only focus on the modal operators, like will, can, may, etc. Modal operators are one of the mostly used modal expressions. Modal operators can express the mood and attitude of the speaker, mainly used to express the speaker's views or opinions, make suggestions or show the speaker's attitude, etc. Modal operators can be divided into three categories: high-value modal operator, such as must,

ought to, have to, need; median modal operators, e.g., will, would, should, shall; and low value modal operators, such as can, could, may, might, etc.

Findings and Analysis

In this study, eight expressions that are frequently used in English representing respectively the four types of orientation and six modal operators of low, median, and high value are searched in the corpus MSECCL-SEM, short for Multimodal Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners-Science & Engineering Majors. Four hundred and forty-two participants from five different universities of science and engineering in China covering key universities and local universities were asked to make conversations in groups. Videos of 150 oral group discussions in five universities of science and engineering in China were transcribed into texts (including key universities and local universities) with a total of 85,540 words. The searched items are shown in detail in Table 2. All spoken transcribed corpus texts are marked with the speaker's status, gender, major, and various non-verbal information.

Table 2

Searched Items in the Corpus

| Orientation | | | | Value (modal operator) | | |
|-------------|-----------|-------------------|-----------|------------------------|--------|-----|
| Sub. exp. | Sub. imp. | Ob. exp. | Ob. imp. | High | Median | Low |
| I think | may | It's said that | certainly | must | should | may |
| I believe | should | It's difficult to | usually | have to | will | can |

Notes. Sub. = Subjective; Ob. = Objective; Exp. = Explicit; Imp. = Implicit.

Use Frequency of Orientation Types

All the items shown in Table 2 are searched in the corpus MSECCL-SEM. As we can see from the Table 3, the use of subjective forms takes up 97.22% from the whole while objective forms only add up to 2.7%. Then, from the perspective of explicit and implicit forms, 68.28% of the modality forms are explicit, while 31.64% of the modality forms are implicit.

Table 3

The Distribution of Different Orientation Types

| Orientation | Items | Number | Percentage (%) |
|---------------------|-----------------|--------|----------------|
| Subjective explicit | I think | 1,015 | 66.47 |
| | I believe | 17 | 1.11 |
| Subjective implicit | may | 173 | 11.3 |
| | should | 280 | 18.34 |
| Objective explicit | It is said that | 5 | 0.3 |
| | It's difficult | 6 | 0.4 |
| Objective implicit | certainly | 9 | 0.6 |
| | usually | 22 | 1.4 |
| Total | | 1,527 | 100 |

From the statistic, it is obvious that L2 students use more subjective modality markers than objective ones. Subjective modality markers are often used to express one's own opinion. The corpus collected is the oral group discussion of students. In order to ensure that students are relaxed and confident in the topic discussion,

students have enough time to prepare before the discussion. Moreover, the topic itself is familiar to students, involving campus life, cultural differences, hot social phenomena, and so on, for example “What would you like to do after graduation” and “What factors influence you most in your choice of life partner”. These topics are designed to get the speakers’ own opinion on some choices and social phenomenon. Therefore, in such context, L2 students use more subjective modality markers than objective ones. On the other hand, the sum and percentage of the objective modality markers very little occur comparing to the subjective modality markers. Objective modality markers, like “It said that”, are often used to cite data or opinions of others and to give examples to support the speaker’s point of view. Some examples are shown below.

It is said that the post-eighties are faced with more troubles in their life, love and marriage.

It is said that the famous people Qu Yuan was died on the May the fifth in lunar calendar.

It is said that if you have the grass on the boat it can drive away the evil.

In Sentence (1), the two speakers were talking about what factors should be considered when choosing a lifetime partner. One of the speakers started the conversation with this sentence trying to illustrate the not so promising situation faced by post-eighties. In the process of interpersonal communication, the speaker wants to express his own attitudes and opinions on the one hand, and on the other hand, he fears that he may not be recognized or may even be ridiculed, thus citing the views of others for self-protection. This modality marker shows that the fact that the current situation of the post-80s is not good is not the speaker’s own opinion but the conclusion reached by some other person and here the speaker only borrows other people’s opinion to show his own standpoint. In Sentences (2) and (3), they were talking about Chinese traditional festival and the marker is used to illustrate this is from some folk legend, therefore, the listener can choose to believe it or not. The speaker uses this objective modality marker to show the objectivity of his utterance and give the listeners more options, thus saving the risk of being denied at the same time.

The lack of using objective modality markers also shows the low language proficiency of the L2 speakers. Compared with native speakers, English learners in China obviously overuse discourse markers, like “I think”, which may be caused by anxiety of communication or a low level of language ability. Possible reasons for overuse are: (1) language use habit; the first word that many students usually say when speaking English is such markers like I think...; (2) avoidance strategy; because the vocabulary of the L2 learners is not enough, for the sake of insurance, learners like to express their ideas in commonly seen language or in a more easier way; (3) their English level is limited, which leads to weak understanding of learners’ collocation and weak language use ability; (4) the influence of negative transfer of mother tongue, “I think... I think... I think...” in Chinese can be used as the beginning of conversation. Therefore, some students apply the same thinking pattern to English speaking.

Use Frequency of Different Modal Operators With Various Value

By searching the items shown in Table 2, it is found that high value modal operators must and have to are used 122 and 66 times respectively. Median value modal operators should is uttered 280 times and will 780 times while low value modal operators may is used 173 times and can 1,040 times.

From the whole, most of the used modal operators is of median and low value. Generally speaking, the dominant party will use higher-value modal words in daily life, that is, people with high social status will use high-value modal words to prove their status. And the unmovable social value; on the contrary, the party with the lower social status will use more modal words with lower magnitude to express respect and awe to the other

party. The participants in the conversation are all students of the similar age so they seldom use high value modal operators to be modest and friendly.

The most frequently used modal operators is “can”. The speaker used a lot of modal words “can” to be more objective. On the one hand, the use of a large number of can demonstrates the speaker’s views and positions; at the same time, it also enhances the objectivity of his attitudes and opinions, as if people feel that the content proposed by the speaker is very objective and has been recognized by many other people. Thereby, the audience’s recognition of the speech content is enhanced.

Conclusion

This paper studies the use of modality discourse markers among the L2 speakers in China based on an oral English corpus consisting of conversations made by L2 students all over the country. It is found that during daily communication L2 speakers use more subjective modality markers than objective ones and they use modal operators of median and low value at the most time. Moreover, the L2 speakers tend to overuse the subjective modality marker “I think” because of language habits and lack of language proficiency. This study analyzed the language use of L2 speakers in terms of modality system and its interpersonal function, which also shed light on second language learning and teaching. Teachers should pay more attention to the cultivation of students’ awareness of correctly using modality markers and enhance their pragmatic skills. However, because of limited source and time, not enough items are searched and analyzed in this research. Further research can be done with a larger scale and a comparison with native speakers.

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