
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Analysis of Direct and Indirect Speech Strategies of Chinese E-commerce Anchors' Language in Selling Goods

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| ABSTRACT

With the aspect of the direct and indirect speech strategies, this study makes an analysis of the language used by Chinese e-commerce anchors in selling goods. It finds that the anchor not only expresses his real intention in a direct way but also often uses some indirect speech so that the listener needs to infer and understand the meaning behind the speech. Those strategies are specifically manifested by the assertive, directive, commissive and expressive in direct speech, as well as the presupposition, parenthesis and hedges in indirect speech. Through these speech strategies, anchors can make their language more convincing, more persuasive so as to arouse consumers' desire for shopping, which finally achieves the purpose of selling goods.

| KEYWORDS

E-commerce anchors' language; speech strategy; directness and indirectness; speech act

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

In the internet era, there are obvious differences between the language expressions in the new media and those in the traditional media. The traditional media expressions, which were well-spoken, have gradually diminished in effectiveness after entering the "socialized" internet era. An e-commerce anchor is also a language artist, and his improvised spoken expression, discourse skills, and roles are, to a certain extent, in line with the research of broadcasting and pragmatics. In the context of the internet, an e-commerce anchor's speech strategy presents his main idea, communicative purpose and personal discourse image to the audience. Therefore, it is important to investigate the speech strategies used by e-commerce anchors at their work.

As e-commerce live-streaming thrives in China in the past few years, more and more scholars have shown their interest in it. The academic research on e-commerce live-streaming began in 2019, but most of the research mainly focuses on the perspective of broadcasting, while there are fewer studies from the linguistic perspective. Among them, Cheng (2020) used language signs, non-language signs and the rhetoric of signs in semiotics to interpret the phenomenon of live-streaming. He mentioned that e-commerce anchors reconstructed the language system in live-streaming by using internet slang and pet phrases. Zhu and Shu (2021) analyzed the speech of e-commerce anchors from the perspective of rhyme, lexicon, grammar and rhetoric, which illustrated the exaggerations in their speech. Wang (2021) analyzed the speech characteristics, speech strategies and the use of cooperative principles of a particular e-commerce anchor. Wu et al. (2022) made a case study on how live-streamers construct their conversations in order to attract an audience and hold on to potential customers. Under the framework of Aristotle's rhetorical theory of persuasion, Deng (2022) explored how the live streamer follows ethos, pathos, and logos to achieve the purpose of persuasion. Those existing studies reveal that it is possible to study the e-commerce anchor's language from a linguistic perspective. What's more, theory in pragmatics may be the best one to apply in the process of analysis. Therefore, this study aims to explore the language used by e-commerce anchors in selling goods from the pragmatic perspective---direct ad indirect speech strategy, so as to provide a new look at the use of speech strategies in the context of new media.

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2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory is a well-known theory in pragmatics, which aims to answer the question of how language is used to “act” rather than to “refer”, reflecting the concept of “saying is acting” (He, 2000). The founder of Speech Act Theory is the British philosopher John Austin, who introduced it in his book *How to Do Things with Words*. Austin abstracted three types of acts from a complete speech act, named “locutionary act”, “illocutionary act”, and “perlocutionary act”. The locutionary act is the act of uttering words, phrases, and clauses. It is the act of conveying literal meaning by means of syntax, lexicon and phonology. The illocutionary act is the act of expressing the speaker’s intention; it is the act performed in saying something. The perlocutionary act is the act performed by or resulting from saying something; it is the consequence of or the change brought about by the utterance. It is worth clarifying that the triad of speech acts refers to the three acts that a complete speech act has at the same time. What’s more, Austin distinguished the concept of constatives and performatives. Generally speaking, constatives refer to the utterance of meaningful words in a linguistic context; while performatives have the illocutionary force in a specific context (He & Ran, 2009). According to the illocutionary force, Austin further classified sentences into five types, i.e., verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives and expositives (Austin, 1975). Although this sort of classification received some criticism, it has influenced the following linguist to establish a more perfect theory.

2.2 Direct and Indirect Speech Act

According to Yule (1996), if the structure has a direct relationship with the function of the utterance performed, then we could identify this utterance as a direct speech act. When a speaker intends to give a command to the hearer to give him a cup of tea by producing an utterance in the imperative form, the speaker performs a direct speech act. Because the form of the utterance has a direct relationship with its function, that is, giving a command.

According to Smith (1991), an indirect speech act is an utterance in which an illocutionary act is performed by another type of illocutionary act. Searle (1975) thinks indirect speech act concerns how the speaker can say one thing and imply that while also means something another. And because meaning is based on the part of the speaker, a big part of the issue is how the listener can understand the indirect speech act. Thus, Searle (1975) suggests that to get the point of the indirect speech act, what is needed to be understood is “the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background both linguistic and non-linguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and interference on the part of the hearer. One of the well-known examples of an indirect speech act given by Searle (1975) is “can you pass the salt?”. This utterance is a question, but it does not really have the function of asking. The true intention of the speaker is to make a request. In addition, Yule (1996) emphasized the characteristic of the indirect speech act by looking at the relationship between the structure of an utterance and its function. If there is an indirect relationship between the grammatical form and the function of the utterance, then that is the type of indirect speech act. This is a common way to make an indirect speech in our daily life.

2.3 Speech strategies in e-commerce anchors’ language

McLuhan said: The medium is an extension of the person (Logan, 2010). With the in-depth development of internet technology, our media has changed. The relationship between media and human beings has shifted from a single sensation in the past to a comprehensive sensation, thinking and interpersonal relationship. This extension makes the interaction between the two sides of the conversation in the online media context more prominent and brings a more realistic experience to both sides in verbal communication (Chen et al., 2021). The language used by e-commerce anchors in live-streaming for selling goods is different from that in the traditional e-commerce set, which is featured with old and monotonous language. According to Liu (2007), the study of pragmatic strategies occupies a central position in pragmatics. Pragmatic strategies are the linguistic approaches or means used by language users to achieve the purpose of verbal communication in a certain context, and speakers use pragmatic strategies regardless of whether they use direct or indirect language. Therefore, a micro-level analysis of the direct, pragmatic strategies, indirect pragmatic strategies and non-audible language strategies of e-commerce anchors’ language in live-streaming can help promote an in-depth discussion of how e-commerce anchors use pragmatic strategies to achieve communicative purposes.

3. Results

This study takes Chinese e-commerce anchors’ language used in live-streaming as a corpus, exploring the speech strategies of these anchors in the process of verbal communication from two aspects, namely, direct and indirect speech strategies. The results are as follows.

3.1 Direct speech strategies: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive

Based on Austin's Speech Act Theory, Searle classified speech acts into five categories in terms of the different functions they perform, namely, assertive, directness, commissive, expressive and declaration. The e-commerce anchor can choose any speech strategies among them to facilitate the communicative purpose during the live-streaming for selling goods. But no matter which speech strategy the speaker adopts, it carries a certain intention. As the core element of the three elements of e-commerce live-streaming---"people, goods, and field", the real intention of the anchors' speech is to sell the products and maximize the benefits of merchants, consumers and his own. The following example illustrates the direct speech strategy used by the anchor to communicate with the audience.

3.1.1 Assertive

Assertive indicate the speaker's attitude or position on something. Generally speaking, what the speaker said should be consistent with the facts, i.e., be objective.

Example 1:

Anchor: 简单来说就是光源发出，把白光分成红绿蓝三元素，分别引导到3LCD芯片上，芯片再将光处理成三色的画面，所以我们的画面就是全色彩画面，而且我们是原生1080P的分辨率，超级清晰

(Simply put, the white light will be divided into RGB, which will be guided to the 3LCD chips, respectively. The chip then processes the light into a three-color picture, so our picture is a full-color picture. What's more, it has a resolution of 1080P, so the image is very clear on the wall.)

Example 2:

Anchor: 这款就是精纯烟酰胺实力美白，防晒加祛斑双特证，不搓泥，而且成膜速度快，还温和不刺激肌肤。

(This product has a strong effect on skin whitening with pure nicotinamide. It has two certificates, sun block and skin-lightening. It won't lump, and it gets dry very quickly. It has mild non-stimulating nature.)

In the above example, the anchor's detailed introduction of the product all came from the text written by the professional team of the product. Therefore, when he is introducing, the anchor tends to adopt the technical terms during the live-streaming, which sounds more authoritative and convincing. Nowadays, with the direct strategy, using assertive to make an authoritative statement has become a popular way for the e-commerce anchors to gain the customers' trust.

3.1.2 Directive

The directive indicates that the speaker is using inviting, commanding, and directive words to some extent to make the hearer do something. In the following examples, the anchor tries to express what he wants the listener to do through a directive speech act.

Example 1:

Anchor: 所有女生，买它！买它！买它！

(All the girls, please buy it! Please! Please!)

Example 2:

Anchor: 不要离开，马上发放优惠券！

(Don't leave! Coupons are coming!)

In the above-mentioned examples, speeches like "买它！买它！买它！" and "不要离开" are characterized by instruction and suggestion. This kind of word or phrase is quite common in this kind of live-streaming. In these situations, the anchor is using directive speech and hopes the audience will do as he states. That is to say, when the anchor is saying "买它！买它！买它！" the listener should understand that the anchor wants them to complete the action of purchasing goods. This reveals how the anchors use speech with suggestion or invitation to achieve their communicative intention directly.

3.1.3 Commissive

The category of commissive, as its name suggests, indicates the speaker's obligation to perform a certain action. This kind of speech act expresses the speaker's commitment and sincerity. Thus, it helps anchor a lot to gain the audience's trust.

Example 1:

Anchor: 直接给你们199到手，让你们买到极致无比的性价比！

(You can get it for only 199 RMB. We are trying to let you guys buy it as cost-effectively as possible.)

Example 2:

Anchor: 我们没有香精，没有酒精，没有硅，没有矿油，没有滑石粉。所以这瓶粉底液上脸无负担感，巨好用。

(There is no essence, no alcohol, no silicon, no mineral oil, and no talcum powder so that it creates the transparent dressing of making up.)

In the above case, the e-commerce anchor is actually making a promise. Obviously, it is a direct speech. We all know that commitment or promise has the power of persuasion. When an anchor with good fame makes a commitment, his word could make the audience feel secure and choose to believe him. This is the reason why we can see lots of commitment in the advertisement.

3.1.4 Expressive

Expressive shows the speaker's mental state of things based on the speech content that guarantees authenticity, which can be a speech act of thanks, apology, welcome, etc. Generally speaking, expressive language can help us communicate our moods and feeling. It may or may not contain any real information. This is because it is mainly used to convey one's emotions.

Example 1:

Anchor: 希望大家可以多多关注主播的直播间，谢谢大家的支持！

(I really hope you guys can subscribe our channel. Thanks for your support!)

Example 2:

Anchor: Hello! Hello! 大家下午好！我们来喽！

(Hello, hello! Good afternoon, everybody! We are coming!)

In those examples, the anchor is expressing his gratitude and greeting to everyone. There is no useful information in the first example, but those words can actually impress the audience a lot. And the greeting seems full of enthusiasm; the audience can feel the anchor's passion and interact with him as well, which is exactly the function of warming-up.

3.2 Indirect speech strategy: presupposition, parenthesis, vagueness

As we have mentioned before, an indirect speech act is an utterance in which an illocutionary act is performed by another type of illocutionary act. Therefore, in certain contexts, the speaker's words express implicit pragmatic information rather than the literal meaning, and the listener should go beyond the literal meaning to deduce the speaker's real meaning. Indirect speech strategy is the core research in pragmatics. Therefore, the analysis of e-commerce anchors' choice of words, structures or non-pragmatic strategies can help to analyze the characteristics of the language used by those e-commerce anchors in live-streaming for selling goods.

3.2.1 Presupposition

Presupposition was put forward by Grice (1975). In pragmatics, a presupposition is an implicit assumption about the world or background belief relating to an utterance whose truth is taken for granted in discourse. Wodak (2007) mentioned that in terms of gaining support from the hearer, presupposition seems to have an unusual function. Generally speaking, presupposition will be accepted by the hearer almost without any doubt. And Van Dijk (1998) also think a presupposition is a powerful tool which could be used by a speaker to convey his ideology. We know presupposition is shared knowledge, and it has the characteristics of subjectivity. In the live-streaming, by using the presupposition featured with a request, asking and invitation, the anchor will have an interaction with his audience, which aims to emphasize what the anchor is going to say. Therefore, it will definitely draw the audience's attention.

Example 1:

Anchor: 美眉们来喽！全球首次调价！

(Attention, all girls! A price reduction for the first time is coming!)

Example 2:

Anchor: ok, 那么大家准备好了吗? 跟大家预告一下, 是大家特别期待的!

(Ok. Is everybody ready? The next product is what everybody really expects.)

The analysis of the example above shows that the anchor uses some padding to introduce the product. They are all presuppositions. By using presupposition, the anchor didn't tell the audience what the next product is direct; however, he described it in an indirect way, giving the product a sense of mystery. Therefore, the audience will be more curious about the product and pay more attention to it. This is actually what the anchor wants.

3.2.2 Parenthesis

With the in-depth development of pragmatics, Chinese scholars pay more and more attention to the relationship between pragmatics and lexicon, grammar and semantics. Parenthesis is regarded as a form of pet phrase, and it has become a topic in pragmatic research. Si (2009) made a relatively comprehensive depiction of the framework for studying parenthesis. He thought the using of parenthesis was to keep the cohesion of the speech. With the relevance theory, He (2006) investigated the pragmatic feature of parenthesis. He regards parenthesis as an independent element, which does not have structural relations with other components in a sentence but still has certain pragmatic functions. In a specific context, because of the continuous turn-taking in the speech, the speaker may use the parenthesis to draw the listener's attention, to indicate his attitude, or to emphasize. Nowadays, in the internet context, the e-commerce anchor's language could be very flexible. Anchors need to be quick-minded so as to respond to those sudden questions raised by the audience. The use of parenthesis could give more time for the speaker to think and organize his language. In addition, when the speaker does not understand the meaning of the listener's words and needs to further determine the intention of the interlocutor, then the speaker can use parenthesis to make a response. Thus, parenthesis is everywhere in e-commerce anchors' language and definitely has a certain pragmatic function.

Example 1:

Anchor: 听清楚哦, 我们是380一瓶50ml的防晒霜, 再加8个7ml的小样。

(Listen to me carefully, we sell this sun-scream in 50ml at the price of 380 RMB, with 8 samples 7ml as freebie.)

Example 2:

Anchor: 你知道吗, 这套水乳是我去年用了感觉特别好用的。

(You know, this set of make-up water and lotion is what I have used and gave me a really good experience.)

The anchor uses parenthesis in both of these two examples. Actually, the position of the parenthesis is relatively flexible, which indicates subjectivity when we use it. However, although they are subjective expressions, it plays a great role in persuading. This is because the parenthesis itself is convincing. What's more, when there is a parenthesis, the hearer will pay more attention to its following content; thus, it will have a function of emphasis.

3.2.3 Hedges

Fuzziness is one of the objective characteristics of human language, which makes language flexible and reliable. At the beginning of the 20th century, linguist L.A. Zadeh (1965) first used the concept of "fuzzy sets", which marks the beginning of the study on vagueness. As a kind of vagueness, hedges also aroused lots of linguists' interest. L.A. Zadeh defined hedges as words with a degree of vagueness. They can be divided into two categories. One is directly modifying words, such as very, more or less, hardly, etc., and the other is words that express the degree of something, such as essentially, in a sense, practically, etc. After that, Lakoff (1973) defined hedges as words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy, and gave some examples, such as sort of, kind of, roughly, relatively, somewhat, basically, and so on. He (1985) thinks besides those vagueness words that mentioned before; hedges should also include module verbs and tag questions. From those definitions, we could know that hedges cover different kinds of words, and those words are so common that we can use them anywhere and anytime. In communication, speakers tend to express themselves inexplicitly with hedges on purpose to avoid being assertive. What's more, such hedges as "kind of", "to some extent", "somewhat", and "more or less" are effective in showing politeness to the hearers in conversations. This could also be observed in anchors' language when they are live-streaming.

Example 1:

Anchor: 真的, 美眉, 有一些修护面霜是干皮不能用的, 因为它太干了。

(Seriously, girls, some kinds of treatment creams are not suitable for dry skin because it's too dry.)

Example 2:

Anchor: 9k, 1w, 1w+, 好多人在抢, 真的好多人抢这个, 就剩一点了。

(9k, 10k, 10k+, so many people are ordering it, really, so many people. Only a few have left.)

The hedge in example 1 is “一些(some)”. Instead of directly speaking out the name of those products, the anchor uses a hedge. As an anchor for selling a variety of products, his word won't offend other brands, so they will still have a cooperation in the future. Hedge used in example 2 is “好多(so many)” and “一点(a few)”. Maybe the anchor doesn't know the exact number, or maybe there are only a few of them, but he doesn't want to cause anxiety among the audience, so he uses hedges. It can help to reduce the responsibility of what he has said and make his words sound more convincing.

4. Conclusion

Based on the speech act theory, this study tends to discover what kind of speech strategies the Chinese e-commerce anchors have used in selling goods. It mainly analyzed their speech from the perspective of direct and indirect speech strategies. It found that those anchors not only express their real intentions in a direct way to avoid obscurity and incomprehensibility but also use some indirect speech to let listeners make an inference from their words. Specifically speaking, the direct speech strategies they use include assertive, directive, commissive and expressive, while the indirect speech strategies they use include presupposition, parenthesis and hedges. Through these speech strategies, anchors can make their language more convincing, more persuasive so as to arouse consumers' desire for shopping, which finally achieves the purpose of selling goods. The author also found that the language used by the e-commerce anchors in their speech strategies is simple and casual, indicating the subjectivity of individuals. Therefore, the language may be used inappropriately and lack cultural connotation. The author believes that this is where those anchors can improve, pursuing language effectiveness while also focusing on its cultural connotation. This study could provide a new look at how to interpret the language used by e-commerce anchors in selling goods. However, as this study is a qualitative analysis, if a quantitative analysis could be conducted as well, it could be more convincing in showing the strategies used by those anchors.

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