

2014

BioTechnology

An Indian Journal

FULL PAPER

BTAIJ, 10(24), 2014 [16401-16407]

Pragmatic harmony in Chinese public signs on environmental protection

Zhoumin Yuan

Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications

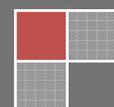
E-mail : Zhoumin.Yuan@colorado.edu

ABSTRACT

The present study attempts to explore the linguistic pragmatic features of the Chinese public signs on environmental protection and the strategies employed in them within the analytical framework of Speech Act Theory. It is found that requests and some related indirect speech acts are frequently exploited in this category of public discourse; in terms of extended speech acts, central speech act (CSP) and its concurrence with auxiliary speech act (ASP) are most often found. It is argued in the light of Face Theory that these pragmatic features reveal the producers' adaptation to the current social and psychological contexts of China in the new historical times and reflect their humanism and socio-psychological state of pursuing pragmatic harmony.

KEYWORDS

Environmental protection; Chinese public signs; Speech act, adaptation; Pragmatic harmony.



INTRODUCTION

“Chinese public signs”, is a vertical crossing open system, relatively stable and constantly changeable.^[15], covering a wide scope, such as publicity and service signs or slogans posted in public place, offering guidance, reminder and giving warnings^[4].

Here are some examples of Chinese public signs on environmental protection (CPSEP hereafter):

(1) 一只水龙头一分钟流5升水。

Yizhi shuilongtou yifenzhong liu wushengshui
One water faucet one minute flow five liter water
5 liter of water flows from a faucet within a minute.

(2) 花有意难开口， 人有情莫动手。

Hua youyi nan kaikou, ren youqing mo dongshou
Flower have intention difficult open mouth, people have affection do not move hand
Flowers won't say; people won't play.

(3) 禁止在此倒垃圾。

Jinzhi zaici dao laji
Forbid at here throw garbage
Garbage is forbidden here.

(4) 任何企业必须执行环保条例。

Renhe qiye bixu zhixing huanbao tiaoli
Any enterprise must carry out environmental protection regulations.
Any enterprise must carry out the environmental protection regulations.

From the examples above, we can easily find that public signs are concise and goal-oriented. However, careful readers may notice that these public signs have diversified styles and reflect different design concepts. (1) is a statement of facts, (2) shows that people are not allowed to pick the flowers, (3) and (4) are written with a blunt tone, and audiences are directly forbidden or ordered to do something. Drawn natural data from CPSEP in Nanjing (capital city of Jiangsu province) and Hefei (capital city of Anhui province), The present study, with a combination of quantitative and qualitative research method, attempts to explore their pragmatological features and pragmatic strategies, attempting to find the contextual constraints governing the production of CPSEP, thus revealing pragmatic harmony in CPSEP.

THE STUDY OF CHINESE PUBLIC SIGNS

As a research topic in sociolinguistics and pragmatics, public signs have increasingly caught the eyes of academic and public circles in developing china. Previous studies on social public signs mainly follow two paths, the ontological discussion and the applied research. The former focused on the study of linguistic characteristics (Wang & Yu, 1999) and methodology^[9]. The latter is widely reflected on the study of Chinese warning signs and their English translation. More recently, the research subject of public signs is gradually extending to some specific fields, such as traffic slogans, warning signs in the rear of cars and so on.

Cui^[7] claims that some warning signs neglect the communicative effect. Though some polite words are used, such as “please”, the audience still feels unpleasant upon reading such signs. There is also a kind of public signs, such as “NO Smoking”, “keeping away from smoking for the sake of others’ health”. Though there is no apparent inappropriateness inside, yet the smokers depicted by the sign, are not treated as humane subjects, but objects of being educated, thus resulting in their dislike, even rejection.

Chen^[4] argues that public signs belong to the category of social administration terms. As a kind of public signs, the notice signs are concise, widely used and socially functioned. He investigated 456 pieces of social notice signs in a residential area and analyzed the pragmatic features and strategies under the framework of Linguistic Adaptation Theory, finding the notice sign reflects the designer’s administrative intentions and their consideration of different social contexts.

On the one hand, Public signs is to pass messages and provide reminders for the public. On the other hand, its ultimate goal is to offer help, expecting the public to understand and accept its kind offer for better social order and for the convenience and benefit of the public. Therefore, designers of public signs are expected to concern aesthetic taste of public signs for the ease of recognition. From the angle of sociolinguistics, Pan & Zhou^[12] hold the view that the design of the traffic slogan should reflect the public’s awareness and the principle of service, as well as the humanistic feelings and thoughts. Jiang & Wang^[11] investigate the warning signs of the rear of cars, and summarize the rhetoric and pragmatic features. Xu & Wang^[13] claim that with a combination of simplicity, diversity, variability, humor, fashion and sociality, the sign of the rear of cars is regarded as a special kind of social dialect.

From the reviews above, we can find that, in terms of research topic, there are still no relevant researches on CPSEP; in terms of theoretical framework, few studies employ speech act theory to analyze CPSEP; in terms of methodology, apart from the study by Chen^[4], most studies support the findings merely with descriptions, lacking empirical evidence based on field work. In view of this, this article aims to investigate pragmatic attributes and strategies of Chinese public signs on environmental protection (CPSEP), revealing pragmatic constraint factors in producing CPSEP and their features of pragmatic harmony under present Chinese harmonious context.

DATA

The data for the present study comes from a combination of field work and internet search. The first author spent three days on an electronic bike searching every corner of Nanjing city, Jiangsu Province in April 2009 and another two days in Hefei city, Anhui Province in July 2009. When he found the sign, he stopped to copy it down in a pocketbook, resulting in a total of 113 pieces. After that, he searched in <http://www.e-signs.info> for CPSEP, finding 156 pieces. Putting them together, he collected 239 pieces of signs. Then the two authors worked together to screen 56 repeated signs. Therefore, 187 valid signs are employed for the present study.

PRAGMATIC ATTRIBUTES OF CPSEP

The function of social public signs is to regulate people's behaviors in public place, such as to call on people to abide by social morality and to root out the behavior which does harm to the public^[14]. It aims to arouse readers' awareness of environmental protection, urging them to take practical actions to protect environment and to reduce or eliminate the hazards of environmental behavior, thus helping people create a harmonious ecological living space. The basic attributes of CPSEP include speech act property and face threatening property. The former property attempts to encourage people to take actions to protect environment and the designers intend to reach the purpose by using different speech acts to make others do something (follow or give up a certain behavior), while the latter is to appeal, request or even prohibit a potential act which, in nature interfere with reader's freedom to do something, and further threatens their negative face. Consider the following examples:

(5) 上项目必须先办环保审批手续

Shang xiangmu bixu xian ban huanbao shenpi shouxu

Launch project must before apply for environmental protection approval procedures

Each company must apply for approval procedures of environmental protection before launching any projects.

(6) 提布袋购物是一种时尚。

Ti budai gouwu shi yizhong shishang

Carry cloth bag is a kind fashion

Shopping with cloth bags is a kind of fashion.

The case of (5) uses the word "must", with a harsh tone, expressing an executive order issued by administrative authorities, and is a typical face threatening act. (6) is an announcement on a certain fact, informing readers of a new fashion, with an implied indirect request, thus conveying a polite indirect speech act.

RESULTS

The use of direct and indirect speech acts

Speech acts are the basic or minimal units of verbal communication (Searle, 1976). I classify the CPSEP in our corpus following the division of direct and indirect speech acts.

According to Searle, a speaker using a direct speech act wants to communicate the literal meaning that the words conventionally express; there exists a direct relationship between the form and the function. For example, a speaker says "it's cold here", she means it; she does not intend to request a listener to close the window. A speaker using an indirect speech act wants to communicate a different meaning from the surface meaning; the form and the function are not directly related (Searle, 1979). The indirectness of utterance is a prominent feature of language usage. According to Leech, people use indirect speech acts for the purpose of "politeness" (Leech, 1983).

A speaker performing an indirect speech act communicates more than what the literal meaning conventionally conveys. Searle (1975:60) views indirect speech acts as "one illocutionary act is performed indirectly by way of performing another". In so doing, a speaker performing a speech act intends to communicate another speech act. For example, a speaker performs the speech act of apology by expressing the speech act of statement "I feel sorrowful".

In our corpus, indirect speech acts mainly perform acts of informing, questioning, comforting and thanking, but actually execute requesting act. That is to say, a public sign intends to attain a certain communicative effect by performing an indirect speech act to realize the function of a direct one. Consider the following examples:

(7) 一块旧手机电池能严重污染六万升水。

Yikuai jiu shouji dianchi neng yanzhong wuran liuwang sheng shui

One old mobile phone battery can badly pollute six ten thousand water.

A deserted old mobile phone battery can badly pollute 60,000 liters of water.

The designer of this public sign attract readers' attention by telling the truth that an old mobile phone battery can pollute 60,000 liters of water, thus indirectly requesting people not to litter up old batteries.

(8) 小草有情踏之何忍?

Xiaocao youqing ta zhi he ren?

Little grass have affection, tread it how bear?

How could you tread on these lovely grasses?

Example (8) expresses the sympathy by questioning the potential audience. The designer first depicts the grass as a living creature and then questioning “how could you tread on” to urge the readers to keep off the grass. The following consoling act is more a direct way of requesting.

(9) 劝君莫打三更鸟，子在巢中盼母归。

Quanqun mo da sangengniao, zizai chaozhong panmugui.

Persuade you not beat Sangeng bird, children at nestle expect mother return

Persuading you not to shoot the night birds whose children are expecting the mother to return.

But the speech act of thanking is different from the above mentioned three speech acts in that its designers express their thanks before audiences' actual performing a beneficial speech act that deserves thanks. For example:

(10) 感谢你对花草的爱惜。

Ganxie ni dui haucao de aixi.

Thank you toward flower and grass cherish.

Thank you for your cherishing the flowers and grassess.

Example (10) indicates that designers express their thanks before the public conduct thank-related act, and then these prior thanks can influence their future behavior, leading them to perform some act to protect the flowers and plants. In so doing, the designers may have more chances to gain support, help and cooperation from the public (Chen, 2001)

The four kinds of speech acts discussed above are called non-conventional indirect speech acts; But for the conventional indirect speech acts, their illocutionary force is not easily sensed in that they usually have a fixed pattern. Please consider the following example:

(11) Could you be a bit more quiet?

Example (11) literally presents a question whether the addressee could be a bit more quiet without implementing the directives such as requesting speech act. However, the listener would regard it as a request naturally. This point may be verified by inserting “please” in the end of the sentence or before the auxiliary verb, as in (12) and (13):

(12) Could you be a bit more quiet? Please!

(13) Could you please be a bit more quiet?

Just because of this point, once “Please” is inserted, it directly expresses the illocutionary act and embodied experience and perception would lead us to interpret such kind of sentences as “Request” even without using “please”. For example:

(14) 来也匆匆，去也冲冲。

Laiye congcong, quye chongchong.

Come also rush, go also flush.

Come in a rush and go with a flush.

Example (13) is often seen in water closets. People often rush to water closet as the pace of life in modern society is faster than before, even forgetting to flush it. The designer of this sign first expresses care for the public, and then puts forward a euphemistic request. It indicates that the designer has conformed to the social context of fast-paced life and the psychological context of care for life, whereby it successfully implements the strategy of positive politeness, based on which, the act of requesting is naturally performed with a potential favorable uptake (Mey, 2001)

The three subcategories of direct speech acts in this research all belong to the directive group, which indicates that CPSEP is featured with directness and normalization. Also, the massive use of indirect speech acts shows respect and understanding for the public, exhibiting the harmonious pragmatic feature of Chinese public signs in the new time. Here is the statistical calculation of direct speech acts (further subcategorized into speech acts of prohibiting, ordering and requesting) and indirect speech acts in our corpus.

TABLE 1 : A statistical calculation of speech acts in the corpus

Speech act categories	Amount	Total Percentage	Examples
Prohibiting	3	1.6%	Keep off the grass.
Ordering	6	3.2%	Any enterprise must faithfully implement the environmental-protection regulations.
Requesting	33	17.6%	Please protect the environment.
Indirect speech acts	145	77.6%	Why am I always injured?
Total	187	100%	---

The speech act of prohibiting is aimed to stop the public from violating certain environmental-protection regulation through compulsory measures. Its pragmatic feature is the use of imperative sentence and some certain words, such as “ban” and “prohibit”^[4]. It takes up the least proportion in our corpus (only 1.6%), which indicates that the designers have paid much more attention to politeness. The speech act of ordering is aimed to require the public to observe certain social norm through

compulsory command, the tone of which is comparatively strong, without any choice left to the mass audience. According to the collected data, the producers of such kind of directives may take the voices of official or bureaucracy. For example:

(15) 任何项目需办理环保认证手续。

Renhe xiangmu xu banli huanbao renzheng shouxu

Any project must carry out environmental protection official approval

Any project must be carried out with an official approval of environmental protection.

The addressee of the speech act of ordering is mainly factories, usually with administrative subordination to the governing units. The designers of such kind of signs conform to the social context, where the Chinese government emphasizes environmental protection as more and more factories have emerged.

The illocutionary force of the requesting speech act is obviously gentler than that of the above mentioned speech acts, and its tone is weaker to a certain degree, with more space left for the receivers to make choices whether to obey or not. Although this may threaten the negative face of the receivers, the use of pragmatic strategy, i.e. words such as “please”, “please do not” mitigates the tone, so as to achieve a relative “pragmatic balance” inside the discourse itself.^[5] (Spencer Oatey, 2008, 2012)

(16) 请勿攀折花木。

Qing wu panzhe huamu.

Please do not climb pick follower plants

Please do not climb plants to pick flowers

(17) 请选用无磷洗衣粉。

Qing xuanyong wulin xi yifen

Please select use non - phosphate laundry powder

Please use non - phosphate laundry powder.

Another kind of requesting speech act has certain appealingness, attempting to call on the public to take action to protect the environment.

(18) 人美，街美，城市美；靠你，靠我，靠大家

Renmei, jiemei, chengshimei; kaoni, kaowo, kaodajia.

People beautiful, street beautiful, city beautiful; rely you, rely me, rely us.

Beautiful people, beautiful blocks and beautiful cities; your duty, my duty and our duty.

Such kind of requesting speech act often employs rhetorical devices, so as to arouse the attention and resonance of the public.

(19) 请弯一下腰，让垃圾去它自己该去的地方吧。

Qing wanyixiayao, rang laji qu taziji gaiqude defang ba.

Please bend a little waist, let rubbish go itself should place

Please bend down a little and let rubbish go where it should.

Example (18) takes advantage of personification to give life to rubbish that should go where it should stay. Then, rubbish has its own home, and in order to let it go back home, people are requested to bend down a little. Why not doing it with the effort of lifting a finger? The designer of the sign complaisantly proposes a moderate request to the public through personification, which conforms to China's wish to establish a harmonious society and also the audience's expectation to be respected.

The use of extended speech acts

Ferrari^[10] argues that usually a speech act does not appear alone. Instead, there is often a sequence of speech acts in verbal communication^[5,6]. The three-level analysis of speech acts proposed by Blum-Kulka^[2,3] and Wood & Kroger^[16] claims that a speech act sequence usually consists of Central Speech Act (CSA), Auxiliary Speech Act (ASA) and Microunit. In our corpus, microunit appears only once as shown in the following example:

(20) “嘀哒……” 水龙头正在提醒人们：“快点儿拭去我的泪水，不然我的泪水会流干的”。

“Dida……” shuilongtou zhegnzai tixing renmen: “kuaidian'er shiqu wode leishui, buran wode leishui hui liugande”.

“Di-da……” dripping tap now remind us: hurry wipe my tears, or my tears would flow dry”.

“Di-da……” the dripping tap is reminding us: “hurry up to wipe my tears, or they would be dried”.

In this example, “di-da” is a microunit; “the dripping tap is reminding us” is a declarative auxiliary speech act; the rest is a requesting central speech act. It is the only case in our corpus that the three levels of speech acts appear at the same time.

Differing from daily utterances, besides the three combinations mentioned above, there is also another main kind of speech act, in which a central speech act is repeated in CPSEP, aiming to enhance the illocutionary force. For example:

(21) 垃圾混置是垃圾，垃圾分类是资源。

Laji huizhi shi laji, laji fenlei shi ziyuan.

Rubbish mix is rubbish, rubbish sort is resource.

Mixed rubbish is rubbish; sorted one is resource.

We analyze the data in the respect of how different speech acts are combined. Please consider TABLE 2:

TABLE 2 : An analysis of CPSEP at the speech act level

Extended Speech Act Level	CSA+ASA+Microunit	CSA+CSA	CSA+ASA	CSA	Total
Amount	1	41	42	103	187
Percentage	0.53%	21.92%	22.5%	55.1%	100%

Single central speech act takes up a large proportion, which indicates the conciseness of CPSEP and high frequency of assertives. Corresponding to this, the three levels seldom emerge together, which verifies that CPSEP is clear and concise. In a piece of CPSEP, the repeated emergence of the same central speech act is an explanation of the neatness and rhetoric of the language. The co-occurrence of central speech act and auxiliary speech act indicates the reason why requesting and indirect speech acts take up a large proportion—the use of auxiliary speech act reduces the degree of face threatening and increases its indirectness and politeness, which reflects that in the new era, CPSEP attend to the communicative effect that conforms to social civilization, respects psychological feelings of the audience and pursue pragmatic harmony.

CONCLUSION

Social public signs are a plane mirror which can intuitively reflect the development of contemporary China and the general language situation. As a significant component of social public signs, CPSEP also reflects the attention the Chinese government and public have paid to environmental protection, and the harmonious development of both material civilization construction and spiritual civilization construction in such a rapidly industrialized society. Thus, we may have a restricted view of the development of pragmatic harmony in the process of harmonious society construction of China. In terms of content, CPSEP mainly focuses on water, air, wild animals, forests (including grass and flowers), garbage disposal and automobile exhaust and so on (mobile phones, waste battery, etc.). This reflects the environmental protection theme and the rapid development of both automobile industry and electronic industry in contemporary China. The analysis of speech act indicates that the designers of CPSEP attempt to direct the public to observe certain social norm through massive requesting and indirect speech acts. The research at the speech act level, i.e. the combination of central speech acts and auxiliary speech acts also verifies this point. By employing these pragmatic strategies, on one hand, the designers try hard to convey information to the full extent; on the other hand, they also reflect the philosophy of humanism and mirror the social mentality of people pursuing pragmatic harmony in the in context of Chinese government's purpose of building a harmonious society and realizing Chinese Dreams

REFERENCES

- [1] J.L.Austin; How to do Things with Words.Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. (2002).
- [2] S.Blum-Kulka, J.House, G.Kasper; *Cross-Cultural Pragmatics: Requests and Apologies*. New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, Norwood. (1989).
- [3] S.Blum-Kulka, E.Olshtain; Requests and apologies: A cross-cultural study of speech act realization patterns. *Applied Linguistics*, 5(3), 196-213 (1984).
- [4] Chen Xinren; Hanyu gaoshiyu de yuyong yanjiu (A Pragmatic study of Chinese public signs). *Huawen jiaoxue yu yanjiu (TCSOL Studies)* 1(4), 58-64 (2001).
- [5] Chen Xinren; Lun yuyong pingheng (On pragmatic balance). *Waiyu xuekan (Foreign Language Research)* 27(6), 42-47 (2004).
- [6] Chen Xinren; A New Course in Pragmatics, Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. (2009).
- [7] Cui Dasong; Jingshiyu he shehui wenming (Warning signs and social civilization). *Hanyu xuexi (Chinese Language Learning)* 12(1), 47 (1992).
- [8] Dai Zongxian, Lv Hefa; Gongshiyu hanying fanyi yanjiu-yi 2012nian aoyunhui zhuban chegnshi lundun weili (On Chinese-English translation of public signs- a case study of London, hosting city of 2012 Olympic games). *Zhongguo fanyi(Chinese Translators Journal)* 26(6), 38-42 (2005).
- [9] Feng Xuefeng; Shehui yongyu yanjiude lianggewenti (two issues in the study of social signs). *Yuyan wenzi yingyong (Applied Linguistics)* 10(2), 101-103 (1994).
- [10] A.Ferra; An extended theory of speech acts. *Journal of Pragmatics* 4(3), 233-252 (1980).
- [11] Jiang Hua, Wang Mei; Qiche chewei jingshiyude xiuci he yuyong kaocha(A Rhetoric and Pragmatic Investigation into Warning Signs in the Rear of Cars). *Yuwen zhishi(Chinese Knowledge)* 21(1), 18-19 (2006).
- [12] Pan Jin'an, Zhou Yi; Jiaotong xuanchuan yu sheji de shehui yuyanxue sikao(Socio-linguistic Thinking of the Designation of Traffic ProPagation Logo). *Shanghai gong'angaodengzhuankexuexiao xuebao(Journal of Shanghai Public Security Academy)* 12(2), 29-30/42 (2002).
- [13] Xu Guizhi, Wang Liyuan; Qichewei biaoyude yuyongtedian fenxi (pragmatic features of public signs in the rear of cars). *Xiandai yuwen(Modern Chinese)* 2(6),109-110 (2006).
- [14] Zhang,Xinhong; Shehui yongyu zhongde yuyong shiwu: diaocha yu fenxi(English translation in social languages:

survey and analysis). *Waiyu jiaoxue* (Foreign Language Education) **21(3)**, 14-19/20 (2000).

- [15] Zhou Ri'an; *Shehuiyongyuxuede jueqi*(the emergence of the discipline of social signs). *Yuan wenzi yingyong*(Applied linguistics) **3(3)**, 67-70 (1992).
- [16] L.A.Wood, R.O.Kroger; *The Analysis of Face-work in Discourse: Review and Proposal* [J]. *Journal of Language and Social psychology*. **13(3)**, 248-277 (1994).