An Analysis of Chinese Address Terms From the Perspective of Speech Act Theory

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Address terms are an important resource for conveying relationships. In daily interactions, the use of address terms is unavoidable. Therefore, the choose of address terms is particularly critical to make communicate smoothly with people. Previous scholars have studied address terms from a wide range of perspectives. But there is not much research on Chinese address terms based on speech act theory, which is put forward by John Langshaw Austin. By observing communicative conversations, several findings have been emerged from the analysis. They are professional title, affectionate address terms, and common address terms. These findings express the existential significance of address terms, which are the premise for people to maximize their illocutionary act when communicating. Correct understanding and grasp of the use of address terms is conductive to unfolding the communicative dialogue more smoothly.

Keywords: address terms, speech act theory, illocutionary act

Introduction

An address term is one of the key research objects of scholars. Simply speaking, it is the name that people call others when communicating and creating dialogue, which is the prerequisite for the development of communication. Address term implies addressee's identity, status, and career. Where there is communication, there must be address terms. When it comes to address term, it is necessary to mention the salutation that is very similar in concept. Especially in Chinese, the meaning of salutation and address terms is very close. Although scholars have made many analysis and comparison of address term and salutation. The overlapping of their conceptual connotations makes "address term" and "salutation" have not formed a unified definition. This paper treats the two as consistent concepts and does not make a detailed comparison between them. As a classical language theory, speech act theory, is particularly widely used in various fields. It is one of the important contents of modern pragmatic research, which is proposed by the philosopher John Austin. He abstracts three behaviors from a complete linguistic context: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act, pointing out that people perform all three behaviors simultaneously when expressing a sentence. That means speaking is doing. This paper will analyze the address terms used by people in daily life with speech act theory. It plays a unique role in our lives, reflecting magical communicative information, pragmatic functions, and cultural connotations.

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Literature Review

Scholars have been committed to exploring the pragmatic value of address terms, and have made lots of achievements.

Yu Chunli, Nor Shahila Mansor, Lay Hoon Ang, and Sharon Sharmini (2022) have categorized the Chinese address terms into seven certain types. Then, from the point of illocutionary act, Li (2009) has illustrated that context and address terms are inextricably linked. Later, Hui (2013) has begun to compare the differences between English and Chinese address terms with the speech act theory. Guo (2021) has proposed that in communicative interactions, people usually call someone by incorporating their own culture and experience. From the perspective of the asymmetry of language, Guo (2022) has noticed that some social address terms will cause people to form stereotypes. Some scholars also analyze the psychological changes of characters in the transformation of address terms in literary works. Li (2023) points out that the subtle change of address terms can convey the strong aspiration of the progressive class to pursue equality and social change.

At present, the analysis of Chinese address terms is mostly a case study of address terms, such as the famous literary works or film and television works or comparison of address terms in two languages. There is more research space for the study of the use of address terms in daily life.

Theoretical Framework

This section will first introduce the content of Austin's speech act theory, that is the research method to be adopted in this paper. The second part will divide the object of study into three main categories.

Speech Act Theory

The speech act theory is first coined by the philosopher John Langshaw Austin in the late 1950's of the 20th centuries; Austin believes that language is a peculiar way of behaving and people cannot do without verbal acts such as speaking and writing in the process of communication. He points out three kinds of behaviors from a complete linguistic context: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. The three parts of a verbal act are a whole. That means a complete speech act includes three acts. Syntax, vocabulary, and phoneme are employed to express literal meaning through a locutionary act. Illocutionary act expresses speaker's intention. Perlocutionary act is an act resulting from the use of certain words, which is a consequence or change caused by a discourse. His disciple John Roger Searle further systematically studies and develops speech act theory, consolidating its position as a central theory of pragmatic research (Kong, 2007).

Classification of Address Terms

According to speech act theory, a speaker performs three acts simultaneously when speaking. It is the first message to people. Therefore, address terms are crucial. Combined with the speech act theory, the function of its existence is worth exploring. This paper will analyze the use of address terms in three categories. Professional title is a title associated with the occupation of the person being addressed. Affectionate address terms express a close relationship between speakers. Common address terms are used between people who are not familiar with each other.

Analysis

Professional Title

A professional title is one that is connected to the occupation of the person being addressed. It is frequently

employed as a teacher, doctor, nurse, and so on. Numerous collocations are possible when using these professional titles. As the most appropriate form of dealing with relationships, "surname + occupation" is typically employed to convey the speaker's respect and civility. Such address terms are generally used between superiors and subordinates in the workplace, or between peers who are not very close, but out of respect and courtesy. In Chinese, people say "Xu Boss, I'm tight on money these days. Can you help me?" This example shows that the speaker hopes to get help from the boss through showing respect by calling the professional title. Leaving a good impression on the boss and expecting that the boss would lend him money are his true illocutionary act. It's not just about "I'm poor". Thus, speech act theory is usually a theory about the illocutionary act.

Affectionate Address Terms

Affectionate address terms are often used to address people who are related to one's relatives or people who are close to one's own. The addressee is usually a relative or friend of the speaker.

Among friends or classmates, they often choose to call each other "small + surname" in order to narrow the distance between each other. For example, people say "Small Song, will you go to the courier room?" This kind of address terms is usually found on Chinese campus. Speakers choose affectionate address term to bring each other closer in intimate relationships. The true illocutionary act of this sentence is that the speaker makes a request. To ask the other person if he will go to the courier room is to send a request that the addressee could also get his package back too.

Therefore, "small + surname" is widely used in Chinese address terms to establish intimate relationship.

Common Address Terms

Common address terms are the most practical. It can be used in situations when the speaker does not know the other people well, such as "shu shu" (uncle), "a yi" (aunt), "mei nv" (beauty), "shuai ge" (handsome guys), and so on. Nowadays, there is also an interesting phenomenon that "bao bao" (baby) has become a common address term among people. Even if the speakers are not intimate, they will choose such a title to be polite.

"Have you finished this assignment, baby?" This example is taken from real life. That the speaker asks her classmate whether the homework is completed is not just concerned about the completion of the homework; the behavior she wants to express is to copy the others' homework. Even if they are not friends. "Bao Bao" (baby) becomes a good tool for the speaker to implement the illocutionary act. It's not limited between relatives and lovers anymore.

Thus, this versatile address term is particularly widespread in the interpersonal interactions of people.

Conclusions

This study focuses more on the value of Chinese address terms in everyday life scenarios, using speech act theory as research methodology. Based on three scenes of life: home, school, and work place, this study summarizes three types of address terms, which may be the general and representative classification. They are professional title, affectionate address terms, and common address terms.

These findings have some implications for our language communication. It argues that illocutionary act contained in a sentence can be maximized by means of address terms, contributing to the speaker's intention when people ask for each other or want to pull into a relationship with each other. According to speech act theory, the address terms can express the speaker's psychological intention and emotional attitude to addressee.

Besides, address terms are innovative and contemporary. They may change and add new types with the times. Therefore, the space for inquiry of address terms is extensive. It is worth further exploring this subtle item from various perspectives to deepen our understanding of address terms and promote smooth communication.

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