

Analysis on the Characteristics of Death Discourse Based on Appraisal Theory: Taking the Elderly's Discourse in Hospice Documentary as an Example

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Abstract: Currently, the world is inevitably faced with the challenge of an aging society. Aging is accompanied by a variety of diseases that hasten death. Although in many cultures, people tend to avoid directly expressing death in language, with the booming development of mass media, death often breaks the original private discourse category and becomes a public concern. Between aging and death, hospice care concerns the quality of life of terminally ill patients. Therefore, it is urgent to study the elderly group's death discourse expressed in the hospice stage. Based on the appraisal theory, this study analyzes the realization and distribution characteristics of attitudinal resources in western hospice care documentaries by taking the death discourse of the elderly as research data. It is found that affect resources account for the largest proportion of attitudinal resources, followed by judgment resources and appreciation resources. In addition, the proportion of positive attitudinal resources is higher than that of negative attitudinal resources. This study aims to enrich the theoretical research on domain-specific language use and establish a suitable language environment for the elderly.

1. Introduction

The aging trend in the current global scope is increasingly severe, which will inevitably translate into much greater talk and understanding of death. In many cultures, death is avoided talking about directly. However, with the advent of media, the way of talking about death has become more open [1]. People are not only witnessing a boom in TV dramas and reality TV [2], which makes private death and its emotions visible, but being exposed to genres with more substantial truth claims, such as documentaries. What seems clear is that some trends that have emerged in recent decades are verbalizing the traditional taboo of death. Therefore, as a part of language life, the necessity of studying death-related discourse has become prominent.

The aim of the study is to analyze the realization and distribution characteristics of attitudinal resources in hospice care documentaries by taking the death discourse of the elderly as research data, which is conducive to enriching the theoretical research on domain-specific language use and

establishing an appropriate language environment for the elderly. The following research questions are posed:

- (1) How are the attitudinal resources realized in elderly patients' discourse?
- (2) How are the attitudinal resources distributed in elderly patients' discourse?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hospice Care

Hospice care refers to the provision of medical, social and psychological support to terminally ill patients and their families. Instead of prolonging life through various medical measures, its goal is to improve the quality of life on the basis of alleviating the pain of patients, maintain the life dignity, and provide humanistic care [3, 4]. In this paper, the object of hospice care is the elderly group.

2.2 The Study of Death Discourse

According to Fairclough's definition of discourse, death discourse refers to written, textual or multimodal representations of death or dying, including its products, distribution and consumption processes, as well as the contexts that influence and construct it [5]. The study of death discourse from the perspective of linguistics mainly includes pragmatics, euphemism and narrative study.

From the perspective of pragmatics, there are some researches analyzing the use of language in doctor-patient communication situations with the help of pragmatic theories, such as politeness theory and face theory [6, 7]. When it comes to dealing with the topic of illness disclosure or death expectation, the process of combining politeness with information can provide a timely and honest early guidance for discussing end-of-life matters.

From the perspective of euphemisms, euphemistic expressions are often mentioned in Chinese, which are more than 200 items [8]. The same applies to English. A large number of English death euphemisms are documented, at least 170 items [9]. In addition, the linguistic phenomenon of death language in both Chinese and English relies on profound national cultural traditions, which are determined by the different social systems, values, religious beliefs and costumes [10, 11].

From the perspective of narrative study, interviews with 15 elderly people in southwest China reveals that for patients themselves, they convey the idea of a good death [12]. For doctors and nursing staff, there is a growing consensus that patients should experience a good death instead of hopeless active treatment [13]. As for post-death, a comparative discourse analysis of bereavement narratives in Chinese and American netizens presents the cross-cultural similarities and differences of death discourse [14].

3. Theory and Methodology

Appraisal theory is a new development of systematic functional linguistics on the interpersonal function of language, which allows for an integrated theory and description of the linguistic resources used to construe the value of social observation [15, 16]. It further extends into Attitude, Engagement and Graduation, among which the attitude system is arguably at the center.

According to Martin and White (2005), the attitude system consists of three categories: Affect, which deal with the expression of positive and negative feelings; Judgment, which is concerned with attitudes toward behavior; and Appreciation, which involves evaluations of semiotic and natural phenomena according to the ways in which they are valued or not in a given field [17]. In general, Attitude can be expressed as positive or negative.

To investigate the attitudinal resources reflected in the words of the elderly in the stage of hospice

care, this study adopts text analysis, including qualitative and quantitative methods. The corpus is selected from western documentaries, namely *Passing on* and *Aging Matters: End of Life*. After transcribing the video data over 120 minutes into a text version, attitudinal resources are manually marked and analyzed according to the attitude system.

4. Findings

In this study, an analysis of the death discourse of the elderly in hospice documentaries has been made within the framework of Appraisal Theory. On the basis of strict reference to the definition of attitude system, the realization and distribution of attitudinal resources are analyzed. The major findings are as follows:

Firstly, the discourse of the elderly illustrates how the realization of attitudinal resources reveals the value and connotation of death that the elderly think. More corpus presents that when the elderly are dying, they directly express their preferences for medical treatment. For example, I *didn't like* what he went through. I *don't want* to do that. These words came from Mary, whose lung cancer was in stage 4 and whose husband also died of cancer. After witnessing the pain of her husband's intensive treatment before he died, Mary decided to go into hospice care and not suffer in the same way. The expressions, such as *didn't like* and *don't want*, represent the tendency of Mary in the face of death, that is, the subsystem of Affect – disinclination.

Secondly, the resource of Affect accounts for the largest proportion of the collected discourse (53.33%), followed by Judgment (29.52%) and Appreciation (17.15%), which reveals that the elderly patients in hospice care documentaries prefer Affect resources to directly express their emotions and convey their attitude to people around them, including medical staff and family members. Additionally, positive attitudinal resources (70.89%) are used more frequently than negative resources (29.11%). Since language doesn't exist in a social vacuum but is embedded in social settings and used for certain purposes. Such a result not only shows that the attitude of the elderly towards death is generally positive, but also reflects the positive attitude towards death in Western culture.

5. Conclusion

Through qualitative and quantitative analysis, this study finds that the percentage in Affect is much higher than the other two subsystems, and the last is Appreciation. That is to say, the elderly tend to express their thoughts directly through affect resources, which means that by accompanying the elderly more and facilitating them to express, we can understand their emotional needs in listening, so as to carry out better medical treatment and psychological therapy. In addition, the proportion of positive attitudinal resources is higher than that of negative attitudinal resources, which reveals the positive attitude towards death in Western culture.

In conclusion, the appraisal theory is applied to study how attitudinal resources are implemented in the collected corpus, aiming to bring new enlightenment to the research of death discourse and establish a language environment suitable for the elderly. For example, according to the findings, in the hospice care scenario, the elderly focus on expressing their subjective emotions, which are mostly positive emotions. So in daily communication, the family can provide them with greater psychological and spiritual care, such as concern for their willingness, choices and needs, including where to die, whether to accept aggressive rescue, rather than just providing physical care or indifferent communication. In the current increasingly aging society, death discourse is an integral part of human linguistic life, and further research on it needs to be explored.

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