

## Analyzing Interpersonal Meaning in Chinese Public Service Advertisements: A Systemic Functional Approach

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**Abstract.** The public service advertisement is a type of text that does not aim at making profits but serves the vital interests of the public. Its aim is to provide readers with information about social problems and persuade them to take actions. Drawing on the framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper intends to analyze the interpersonal meaning embodied in Chinese public service advertisements from three perspectives: mood, modality and person. The present study attempts to find out how interpersonal meaning is realized in Chinese public service advertisements and how the advertisements' aim is attained. Findings reveal that Chinese public service advertisements show advertisers' views and influence readers' attitudes and behaviors through the use of mood, modality and person so as to achieve the purpose of providing information and persuading.

### 1. Introduction

With the development of economy and society, advertisements play an increasingly significant role in people's life. Advertisements can be divided into commercial advertisements and public service advertisements [1], which have many differences in nature, contents and target audience. The public service advertisement is a type of text that does not aim at making profits but serves the public. It often takes protecting the environment, saving resources, caring for others, and paying attention to health as the theme to publicize and promote the moral concepts, values and codes of conduct that are conducive to social civilization and progress. As a special text type, the public service advertisement has been studied by many scholars from different perspectives, involving stylistic features, rhetoric, and cultural analysis. Halliday, the founder of Systemic Functional Grammar, clearly pointed out that one of the aims of constructing systemic functional grammar is to provide a theoretical framework for text analysis which can be used to "say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken and written, in modern English" [2]. In view of this, the present study intends to apply Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar to the analysis of Chinese public service advertisements and attempts to find out how interpersonal meaning is realized and how the advertisements' aim is achieved.

The data consists of 122 Chinese public service advertisements, covering 13 themes, such as "anti-smoking", "blood donation", "environmental protection", "animal protection", "protection of water resources", "traffic safety", "respect for the old", "social morality", "anti-corruption", and "mental health".

### 2. Analyzing interpersonal meaning in Chinese public service advertisements

Language is an important tool of human communication and undertakes various functions, among which metafunction is an important part of functional grammar and includes ideational, interpersonal and textual functions [2]. Interpersonal function refers to the "meaning potential" of the speaker as an interlocutor, as well as the participatory function of language [3]. Through this function, the speaker makes himself participate in a situational context to express his attitude and inference, and tries to influence others' attitude and behavior. Interpersonal meaning is mainly

realized by mood and modality: mood indicates what communicative role the speaker chooses in a situational context and the role he sets for the listener while modality expresses the speaker's judgment and attitude towards things [4]. Besides, interpersonal meaning is embodied in the person system, the attitudinal type of Epithet, and prosodic features [2]. In what follows, the interpersonal meaning in Chinese public service advertisements will be analyzed in detail from three aspects of mood, modality and person.

## 2.1 Mood

In the process of human communication, the speaker and the hearer adopt different speech roles. As diverse as the speech roles are, there are two fundamental types, giving and demanding. As for the nature of the commodity exchanged, there are also two basic distinction, goods-&-services and information. These variables (giving and demanding, goods-&-services and information), when taken together, can define four primary speech functions of offer, command, statement and question [2]. And speech functions are closely related to grammatical structures. Statement, question and command are respectively realized by declarative clauses, interrogative clauses and imperative clauses, while offer can be expressed by different sentence patterns. Among the collected data, declarative clauses account for 55%, imperative clauses 40%, and interrogative clauses only 5%.

Public service advertisements are designed to provide important social information, and the speech role of giving information is realized by declarative mood. There are a large number of declarative clauses in Chinese public service advertisements, as shown in the following examples.

Example 1: 吸烟是继战争, 饥饿和瘟疫之后, 对人类生存的最大威胁。

Example 2: 动物是人类亲密的朋友, 人类是动物信赖的伙伴。

Example 3: 如果人类不从现在节约水源, 保护环境, 人类看到的最后一滴水将是自己的眼泪。

Example 4: 贪欲就像气球, 极度膨胀结局只有一个——自毁灭亡。

Example 1 provides and informs the public of an indelible fact that smoking is harmful to health, Examples 2-3 affirm the importance of animal protection, environmental protection and water conservation, while Example 4 indicates the serious consequence of corruption. These public service advertisements are employed to arouse public attention to social issues and enhance the sense of social responsibility by stating one fact after another.

Besides providing information, the ultimate goal of public service advertisements is to persuade readers to take actions. This speech function is command and is generally realized by imperative mood [5], but imperative clauses usually express the meaning of request, persuasion, and suggestions instead of order in the specific genre of advertisements [6], which is also true of public service advertisements.

Example 5: 为了你和家人的健康, 请不要吸烟。

Example 6: 停止战争, 为了孩子!

Example 7: 带着平安上路, 载着幸福回家。

Example 8: 尊重生命, 追求成长。

The above four examples are all imperative clauses with no subject, but these clauses seem to directly communicate with the public, which shortens the psychological distance between the advertiser and readers so as to better persuade and call on the public to participate in public undertakings, paying attention to traffic safety, mental health and other issues.

In addition to declarative and imperative clauses, interrogative clauses also play an important role in public service advertising. The use of interrogative clauses can stimulate readers' interest of thinking about the questions raised by the advertiser, and let them actively participate in the discussion of topics, which contributes to realizing the purpose of public service advertisements.

Example 9: 为何血浓于水? 因为爱在其中。

Example 10: 你想为社会做贡献吗? 你愿为他人献点爱心吗? 请参加无偿献血!

Example 11: 现在, 人类渴了有水喝; 将来, 地球渴了会怎样?

Example 12: 你现在回家吃晚饭还不晚! ——廉洁自律也许和晚饭有关?

In the above Examples 9-10, the advertiser adopts a question-and-answer model that forms a dialogue in the public service advertisement to make the advertisement more vivid and readable. In

Example 11-12, the advertiser raises thought-provoking but unanswered questions to attract readers' attention, which is beneficial to build an invisible interaction between the advertiser and readers.

## 2.2 Modality

Modality includes modalization and modulation. The distinction between modalization and modulation is closely related to the difference between speech roles and the commodity exchanged: when the commodity exchanged is information (a proposition), modalization refers to the speaker's judgment of the validity of the proposition, presented in probability and usuality; if the commodity is goods-&-services (a proposal), modulation refers to the speaker's degree of confidence in the eventual success of the exchange, embodied in obligation and inclination[2]. Both probability and usuality can be expressed by a finite modal operator (e.g. *can*, *may*) or a modal Adjunct (e.g. *perhaps*, *often*) while both obligation and inclination can be expressed by a finite modal operator (e.g. *must*, *should*) or an expansion of the Predicator (e.g. *be supposed to*).

In modern Chinese, there are a number of modal adverbs, including “恐怕”, “没准儿”, “怕是”, “说不定”, “或许” and the like, but most of these words are epistemic, which means there are few obligatory modal words, such as “千万”, “无须”, “务必”, “务须”[7]. Analysis results show that modal words don't occur frequently in Chinese public service advertisements, but they are mostly high-value words with obligation accounting for 70%, probability 17%, inclination 10%, and usuality 3%.

In the data collected, obligatory modality appears most frequently in Chinese public service advertisements, and they use more negative sentence forms, such as “千万别”, “不要”, “不能” in Examples 13-15, which highlights the readers' responsibilities and obligations. As previously mentioned, one aim of public service advertisements is to persuade people to take actions to solve various social problems for the benefit of the public. These problems are closely associated with individuals in society and need to be solved with the strength and efforts of everyone.

Example 13: 千万别点着你的烟, 它会让你变成一缕青烟。

Example 14: 不要让我们的孩子只能在博物馆里才见到今天的动物。

Example 15: 不能再丢垃圾时, 丢了自己的脸。

Example 16: 也许, 你的指尖夹着他人的生命。

Example 17: 换个位置, 也许对你更合适。

In addition to obligatory modality, probability occurs frequently in Chinese public service advertisements. As can be seen from Examples 16-17, the use of “也许” helps avoid absolutization of statements and makes them more acceptable to the reader. Furthermore, probability embodies the politeness principle that can be used to save readers' negative face [8]. In other words, saving readers' negative face involves the fact that the advertiser allows them to disagree with him or her.

## 2.3 Person

Interpersonal meanings are embodied in the person system, both as pronoun (person as Thing, e.g. *she*, *you*) and as possessive (person as Deictic, e.g. *her*, *your*) [2]. In the interpersonal communication, the speaker may assign himself or another person a role with a personal or possessive pronoun [5]. The speaker's particular choice in person system in a particular situation indicates the speaker's attitude, feelings, and interrelationships with the listener.

In Chinese public service advertisements, personal pronouns and possessive pronouns are commonly employed, especially the use of “我们”, “我们的”, “你(您)”, “你(您)的”, which could create an atmosphere of intimate communication between the advertiser and readers and persuade readers to pay close attention to the mentioned problems. The use of the first person pronoun “我们” and the second person pronoun “你” in Chinese public service advertisements will be discussed as follows.

Example 18: 看着孩子脸上那天真的微笑, 我们又怎舍得让这份和平与安宁转瞬即逝呢?

In the above Example 18, the first person pronoun “我们”, an inclusive personal pronoun, refers to the advertiser and readers. Through the use of the inclusive first-person, the advertiser describes himself as a member of the public so as to shorten the distance with readers and stand in the same

position as other readers. It can create a more intimate and harmonious atmosphere, allowing readers to trust the advertiser, accept the suggestions, and take actions to solve the problems.

Example 19: 你想为社会做点贡献吗? 你愿为他人献点爱心吗? 请参加无偿献血!

The second person pronoun “你” is generally employed to refer to readers in public service advertisements. In written texts, the advertiser cannot directly communicate with readers. By using the personal pronoun “你”, the advertiser virtually assigns a role to readers to facilitate the communication between them. In Example 19, the advertiser is unable to communicate with the reader face to face, but combines the second person pronoun “你” with the interrogative clause to create a kind of social interaction, which draws readers into a scene and prompts them to think positively about the questions raised by the advertiser.

### 3. Conclusion

The public service advertisement is a type of text that does not aim at making profits but serves the vital interests of the public. Its aim is to provide readers with information about social problems and persuade them to take positive actions. Drawing on the interpersonal function in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper analyzes Chinese public service advertisements from three aspects: mood, modality and person. In the mood system, declarative and imperative clauses are employed to provide information and persuade readers to take actions, but interrogative clauses also play an important role. In the modality system, high-value modal words of obligation and probability are mainly used to advise readers. In the person system, the use of inclusive first person can shorten the distance with readers while the use of second person can give readers roles and create a kind of social interaction. To sum up, Chinese public service advertisements show advertisers' views and influence readers' attitudes and behaviors through the use of mood, modality and person so as to achieve the purpose of providing information and persuading.

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