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A Study on the Pragmatic Identity Construction in Acceptance Speech at Kobe's Basketball HOF Induction by the Public Figure

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Abstract

On 15th May, 2021, Kobe's widow Vanessa Bryant made an impressive acceptance speech at the Basketball Hall of the Fame Enshrinement Ceremony. This paper takes this speech as the research object and explores the well-known public figure's pragmatic identity of Vanessa and Kobe by adopting the pragmatic theory and Verschueren's theory of language adaptation. Through qualitative analysis, this paper found that in this speech, the speaker, Vanessa, not only constructed her own identity of a decent public speaker and a supporter, but also constructed the identity of Kobe as a strong-willed athlete, a fan-loving star, a great family man and a spiritual leader. And this dynamic identity construction in the acceptance speech is to adapt the communicative context of the public speech.

Keywords: Pragmatic identity; Acceptance speech; Pragmatic motivations.

1. Introduction

Identity has been the hot topic in various fields. In pragmatics, the researchers study the relation between the identity and the discourse, and try to figure out how the communicators convey the meaning through the selection and construction of a particular identity for maintaining or consolidating interpersonal relationship and obtaining specific communicative effects (Chen, 2014). Many scholars have done a lot of studies on it. For example, Yang (2021) analyzed the dialogue between the parents and their children who have prepared for the college entrance examination in a Chinese television drama and discussed how the parents use pragmatic strategies to construct various identities like intellectual companion, conflict mediator and controller. Li (2016) demonstrated that doctor constructed professional, social and personal identities in their thesis acknowledgement to show their academic spirit, ability and personality characteristics. Wang (2020) explored the pragmatic identities' types and motivations in Ma Yun's public speech and revealed that this study can help us have a better understanding of the discourse of speech. Also, Yang and Liu (2017) took Obama's New Year Addresses as the research object to explain the strategies that help to construct president's pragmatic identity. These studies involve a wide range of context, such as the educational or classroom occasions (Xu and Chen, 2015), political speeches and TV programs as mentioned above, and speeches in academic occasions (Guo, 2016), business or legal occasions (Ma and Guo, 2021). They mainly highlight single identity construction and most of the studies focus on the identities of president, teacher, academic researchers and female and so on. However, there are still a small number of studies on the identity of public figures other than the presidents. Therefore, this paper will take the famous public figure Vanessa's (late Kobe Bryant's wife) acceptance speech as the primary resource, and pay careful attention to the questions of how and why the pragmatic identities of Vanessa and Kobe are constructed simultaneously in one discourse. Thus, it can expand the scope of research of the pragmatic identity.

2. Theoretical Framework

In this part, Chen Xinren's pragmatic identity theory and Verschueren's theory of language adaptation will be introduced as the theoretical framework of the analysis of the pragmatic identity construction.

2.1. Chen Xinren's Pragmatic Identity Theory

Pragmatic identity theory was proposed by Chen Xinren, our Chinese scholar. He held that pragmatic identity is a kind of "contextualized identity" and "identity in language use", as well as a pragmatic adaptation to social identities, the process is dynamic (Chen, 2013:27). In a word, it means how the communicators use identity as a pragmatic resource to achieve their communicative goals. Chen (2018:38-39) suggested that pragmatic identity could

be constructed from both macro and micro level, and he modified discursive analytic categorization of Tracy (2002). As shown in the following table:

Table-1. Discursive practice concerning identity construction

	Discursive Practices	Description
Macro level	Discourse content	Such as topic, views, presuppositions, etc.
	Discourse mode	Such as direct, indirect mode, etc.
	Speech acts	Paradigm cases like asserting, thanking
	Discourse features	Discoursal or conversational features
	Code	Language, dialect, slang
	Style	Formal, casual, intimate style
Micro level	Person-referencing	A terms of address to self or others
	Grammatical choice	Grammatical features like tag question, personal pronoun, etc.
	Lexical/ phrase	Words like modals, hedges, etc. which can indicate identity or relationship
	Phonetic features	Features like tone, speed, pitch, stress, etc.

And this paper will adopt this analytical framework to analyze how the speaker constructs the pragmatic identity.

2.2. Verschueren's Theory of Language Adaptation

As for the pragmatic motivations of the identity construction, theory of language adaptation will be employed to explain. It is proposed by Verschueren (2000) who believed that the choice of language in response to different factors is dynamic. The communicator chooses language in response to different factors in order to achieve the purpose of communication. Verschueren (2000) put forward four kinds of adaptability to describe and explain language. And "contextual correlates of adaptability" is one of the main components of adaptation theory, which means that language users must adapt to the communicative context when making language choices. And the communicative context can be divided into physical, social, and psychological contexts. Physical context refers to time and space factors when communicators making language choices; social context refers to social distance, identity relationships, social culture, customs, codes of conduct, values and so on; psychological context refers to communicator's emotional and cognitive factors.

3. Corpus Collection and Research Method

This study takes the acceptance speech given by the Vanessa Bryant at the Basketball Hall of the Fame Enshrinement Ceremony as the research object. On 15th May, 2021, Kobe Bryant was inducted posthumously into the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame of 2020. Bryant, a world-known professional basketball player for Los Angeles Lakers of the National Basketball Association who died in a helicopter crash in January 2020, was presented by Michael Jordan before Bryant's wife, Vanessa Bryant, made a moving speech honoring the former Laker. Bryant is not only an outstanding player and former world champion, but also a spiritual mentor for the young generation who always creates something positive with his deeds. And the annual Hall of Fame induction ceremony has been the event of global concern that attracts worldwide television audience, most of whom are excited and amazed during the whole process of the shortlist announcement. As an audience, the author has also been fascinated by the ceremony, and is especially interested in the speech discourse. The acceptance speech is a special type of public speech. In Vanessa Bryant's acceptance speech, she expressed her thanks to all people on behalf of Class of 2020 inductee, Kobe Bryant, and shared stories and feelings which are remarkably impressive. Follow the reason above, this acceptance speech, which is about 12 minutes and 55 seconds and contains 1488 English words, is chosen as the research corpus. And this paper will analyze the transcript of the speech according to the theory of pragmatic identity and adaptation theory. Also, qualitative research methods is applied in this paper in order to address the following questions:

(1) What kinds of pragmatic identities are dynamically constructed by the speaker in her acceptance speech? And how does the speaker perform the identities in the use of the pragmatic strategies?
(2) What are the pragmatic motivations for the speaker to construct different pragmatic identities in her acceptance speech?

4. Analysis of the Pragmatic Identity Construction and the Related Pragmatic Strategies

In the acceptance speech, Vanessa Bryant not only constructs the identity of herself, but also the identity of her husband, Kobe Bryant. Her choice of the pragmatic identity and that of Kobe Bryant is one of the resources that serve her communicative purpose. In this section, the ways how Vanessa constructed various pragmatic identities by drawing upon the lexico-grammatical, semantic and pragmatic resources in producing her acceptance speech will be discussed.

4.1. Vanessa Bryant's Pragmatic Identity Construction

(1) The identity of public speaker

At the Basketball Hall of the Fame Enshrinement Ceremony, Vanessa was invited to spoke on behalf of his husband. So, the real honoree is not Vanessa, but Kobe Bryant. And Vanessa constantly revealed her identity by choosing the discourse content, especially in the earlier part of her speech. For example:

a) *Right now, I'm sure he's laughing in heaven because I'm about to praise him in public for his accomplishments on one of the most public stages. I can see him now, arms folded, with a huge grin saying, "Isn't this some s---."*

b) *If my husband were here tonight, he would have a long list of people to thank that helped inspire him and equip him to be in the Hall of Fame.*

c) *I wish my husband was here to accept this incredible award. He and Gigi deserve to be here to witness this. Gigi would be so proud to watch her daddy get enshrined into the basketball Hall of Fame. I know he was really looking forward to being here. He asked the Hall of Fame to specifically add a sixth ticket for Capri. He was so happy.*

As we can see the example (a), the speaker described what she imagined Bryan would look like when he won. Though accepting an honor for the late Kobe Bryant is not a very pleasant thing, Vanessa began her speech in a humorous tone. It is obvious that Vanessa intended to create a relaxed atmosphere at the beginning of the speech and draw much attention as possible. And in example (b) and (c), she used subjunctive mood like "he would have to…" "I wish my husband was…" to refer to the real honoree, her husband, and then sharing topic with audience about Kobe's feeling. Through these, she constructed her identity of a decent public speaker who can appropriately control the spot atmosphere.

(2) The identity of a supporter

In the speech, the strategies of lexical choice and person-referencing were applied to help the speaker construct the identity of supporter. For example: *"Kobe was one of a kind. He was special. He was humble, off the court, but bigger than life." "He was intelligent, eloquent and gifted at many things, including public speaking." "He did the work. He broke those records, and he inspired people to be great."* Here, in terms of the word choice, we can see that the adjectives and verbs used in these sentences show a surge of personal emotion, which reflects Vanessa's strong backing to her husband's career. Moreover, the person deixis and form of address are the important linguistic strategies to help to construct one's pragmatic identity. In the latter part of the speech, the speaker constructed her identity of a supporter with a series of use of the second personal pronoun "you". For instance, *"You did it. You're in the Hall of Fame now. You're a true champ. You're not just an MVP, you're an all-time great."* Instead of "he" or "my husband" as can be seen in the former part of the speech, the speaker here uses "you" for 10 times to establish more direct and intimate connection with the late honoree Kobe, and she used the sentence pattern of parallelism to make a compliment to Kobe and give her great recognition. This parallelism pattern makes the sentence more emphatic, which highlights the speaker's identity of supporter. And the form of address applied in the sentences such as *"Congratulations, baby"* and *"I love you forever and always, Kobe Bean Bryant"* emphasis Vanessa's identity of a supporter as a partner, a wife.

4.2. Kobe Bryant's Pragmatic Identity Construction

In the above analysis, we can see Vanessa constructs her own identity of public speaker and supporter in the acceptance speech. Actually, it is common to see——to construct one's own identity in one's own speech. However, what's interesting is that the author found the speaker also constructs other's (refer to Kobe) identity in her speech. Through further observation and analysis, we found two types of pragmatic identities of Kobe Bryant. According to the previous studies on the classification of pragmatic identity (Hyland, 2014: 306-321& Tracy, 2013: 21-24), this paper summarizes two types identities as professional identity and social identity and this classification is refined as shown in the Table 2 below.

Table-2. The classification of Kobe Bryant's pragmatic identity

professional identity	a strong-willed athlete
	a fan-loving star
social identity	a great family man (husband and father)
	a spiritual leader

(1) Professional identity

According to the discourse analytic framework of Tracy's (2002:22) and Chen (2018:38), discourse content refers to the content which can indicate people's identity, such as topic, viewpoint and presupposition and so on. In the acceptance speech, Vanessa tended to regard the discourse content as the significant strategy to construct Kobe Bryant's professional identity. As the examples shown:

d) *Kobe played through injury after injury. To name a few, he had IVs administered during halftimes to play with food poisoning and the flu. He played with a broken nose. He had a broken finger and had it snap back in place, just enough to finish the game. He also taught himself how to use his left hand to play the rest of the season while his finger healed. He even switched to free throws, with a torn Achilles and walked off the court, on his own.*

In example (d), the speaker constructed Kobe's identity of a strong-willed athlete by sharing the story about how Kobe overcame his injuries time and again and then completed the contest. In the whole speech, she used 21

sentences to construct this type of identity. And then, by saying *"People don't know this, but one of the reasons my husband played for injuries and pain was because he said I remember being a little kid sitting in the nosebleeds with his dad to watch my favorite player play",* the speaker switched the topic and began to narrate another relevant topic about how Kobe loved his fans. And the speaker also employed a very direct mode of discourse to construct Kobe's identity of a fan-loving star, for example: "He never forgot about his fans", "He loves you all so much".

    (2) Social identity

As for the construction of Kobe's social identity, the speaker applied a plenty of strategies of speech acts. In Searle's speech acts, five categories are claimed: representatives, expressives, directives, commissives and declarations. And there are 26 expressives that start with "thank you" in the whole speech. Among them, 19 sentences are used to thank Kobe for being the best husband who gave his wife Vanessa amounts of love and care and for being the good father who put his love for family first. Thus, the speaker directly constructed Kobe's identity of a great family man. Apart from that, 7 expressives are employed to thank Kobe for bringing people positive energy and inspiring people to make progress persistently. These sentences emphases the great spiritual influence that Kobe shared with the world, which activates his identity of a spiritual leader.

5. The Pragmatic Motivations of the Dynamic Identity Construction

According to the theory of language adaptation, this paper found that the construction of the identity in this acceptance speech is to adapt the communicative context of the public speech, which specifically means the physical context, social context and psychological context (Verschueren, 2000). Including the goal of expressing thanks to all people, different pragmatic identities are constructed to show the personal characteristics of both Vanessa and Kobe, and to show the vocational ability and professional spirit, and then to gain the recognition from the public and maintain the positive relationship.

From the perspective of the adaptation to the physical world, the pragmatic identities of Vanessa and Kobe have adapted to the different stage and different topic of the public speech context. At the enshrinement ceremony, Vanessa first constructed her identity as a decent public speaker to lighten the atmosphere and to express her gratitude to those important people. This is in accordance with the convention of the acceptance speech. Then Vanessa adopted the identity of supporter. She not only expressed her deep love for the late Kobe, but also helped Kobe build up a good image as an outstanding athlete and a family man as well.

And at the acceptance ceremony, the audiences were Kobe's family, friends, colleagues, fans and others. Vanessa's identity of supporter as a partner, a wife generated empathy. And her thankfulness to those people and the equal interaction with them shortened the social distance, which adapted to the social context.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the adaptation to the psychological context, the pragmatic identity of Kobe that Vanessa constructed adapted to the emotional needs of the communicating parties. Vanessa shared many stories of Kobe to recall him and expressed sincere gratitude to all people who have helped or supported Kobe. That adapted to the positive emotional needs of the audience.

6. Conclusion

In summary, based on the pragmatic identity theory and theory of language adaptation, this paper explores the pragmatic identity construction in the acceptance speech given by a public figure Vanessa Bryant. The author found that Vanessa constructed her identity of a decent public speaker and a supporter. At the same time, she constructed the identity of Kobe as a strong-willed athlete, a fan-loving star, a great family man and a spiritual leader. And this identity construction helps to show the speaker's characteristic and Kobe's professional ability and spirit, and achieves the communicative goal of gaining the recognition from the public and maintaining the positive relationship. This study enriches the research of pragmatic identity.

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