A Survey of Chinese Public Service Advertising From Systemic Functional Perspective

CHEN Linlin[a],*

[a]School of Foreign Languages & Literature, Shandong Normal University, Jinan, China.
*Corresponding author.

Abstract

This paper studies the lexicogrammatical resources that realize interpersonal meanings in the discourse of public service advertising (PSA for short) in an attempt to explore the relationship established between the advertiser and the audience and how it contributes to the communicative effect of the target discourse.The qualitative analysis is complemented with quantitative study to produce more sensible generalizations about the features of this discourse type on the basis of systemic functional linguistics.

Key words: Public service advertising; Interpersonal meaning; Systemic functional linguistics; Discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

Public Service Advertising is commonly defined as advertising that serves the public interest. Originating in 1940s in wartime America, AD Council is the first organization to make public service advertisements, which address incredibly wide array of social concerns: everything from pollution and work safety to precautions of heart disease and dangers of smoking and drinking.

In China, public service advertising in the modern sense appeared in 1986 broadcast by Guiyang TV. The PSAs have proliferated ever since through various channels, from traditional print media to radio, TV, Internet and other newly emerging media. It has become a primary means for the government and charity organizations to promote positive changes and call for help from the public. Unlike commercial advertisements, which aim at publicity of brand names for maximal profits, public service advertising, a non-profit undertaking, seeks to spread ideas. More often than not, it persuades the public to change their behavior or even advocates some altruistic actions. The role advertisers of PSAs assume therefore is of paramount importance to their success. Whether they assume to be preachers who have authority and absolute power over the public or facilitators who are willing to address the target problem along with the audience will generate distinctive effects of communication. This is the primary reason why we study the advertiser-audience relationship as is realized in the lexicogrammatical resources in PSAs.

1. PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON CHINESE PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING

The studies on Chinese public service advertising are conducted primarily from the sociological perspective, dealing with the following aspects: mechanism and administration, channel of communication, social function, production techniques, psychology of the audience and aesthetics (Song, 2001; Zhang, 2004; Gao 1999; Pan, 2001).

Linguistic study of PSAs was not given due attention in the previous research. Researchers usually give suggestions on what the language of PSA should be like based on qualitative study of small samples of discourse. For instance, Pan (2001) states that language in PSA should be brief, avoiding pompous wording and colloquial language is preferred for better communicative effect. Zhang (2004) believes that language of PSAs should be

striking, avoiding impersonal wording such as *buzhun* (not allowed) and *yanjin* (be forbidden). The language should be succinct and humanistic to appeal to the emotion of the audience. Song (2001) emphasizes the function of rhetorical devices used in PSA discourse. Previous studies from the linguistic perspective are merely peripheral explorations and therefore have not done justice to the important role language plays in PSAs.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODOLGOY

2.1 Systemic Functional Grammar

The present study is based on the systemic functional grammar, which, as its founder Halliday states, is "a grammar for the purpose of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English." (Halliday, 2000, p. F41) Systemic functional linguistics has been proved to be an appliable theory in the study of discourses. According to the theory, "Language is modeled as networks of interconnected linguistic systems from which we choose in order to make the meanings we need to make to achieve our communicative purpose." (Eggins, 2004, p.327) The choices we make are mainly used to express ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings, i.e., we use language to talk about our experience, interact with people and organize our messages. These also correspond to three meta-functions of language, among which the interpersonal function is the most pertinent to the present study, in which we explore how advertisers make linguistic choices to interact with the audience, influence their viewpoints about the world and elicit changes of their views or behavior.

The meanings we make are realized by wordings. In his functional grammar, Halliday identifies several lexicogrammatical resources that realize interpersonal meanings, among which mood, modality and person system is explored in the present study.

2.1.1 Mood and Modality

Halliday (2000) sees communication as the exchange of goods & services and information. The speech functions language fulfills are statement (giving information), question (demanding information), offer (giving goods & services) and command (demanding goods & services). They are realized typically by declarative mood, interrogative mood and imperative mood.

Modality indicates the intermediate degrees that fall in between the positive and negative poles (Halliday, 2000). It is further classified into modalization and modulation on the basis of the semantic function of the clause. Modalization is sub-categorized into probability and usuality, indicating how probable or how often the statement is true and modulation into obligation and inclination.

2.1.2 Other Lexico-Grammatical Resources That Realize Personal Meanings

Halliday (2000) states that interpersonal meanings are also embodied in the person system, which will be explored in the present study. Thompson (2000) identifies projected role as a resource to realize interpersonal meanings. While we adopt speech roles, we create a corresponding role for other interactants. We also project a role onto ourselves or the interactants by, for example, naming another person, as is seen in the following example.

> *Reader, I married him.*
> *Can I help you, sir?*
> (Thompson, 2000, p.69)

In the present study, personal pronouns and address terms like *pengyou*(friends) are examined for an exploration of interpersonal meanings they realize.

2.2 Research Methodology

The advertisers of PSAs are usually institutions which have greater power over the audience and from my personal experience they tend to assume an authoritative stance, which is not conducive to the communicative effects of the discourse. What kind of relationship is established between the advertiser and the audience as is reflected in the PSA discourse? Can the relationship contribute to the purpose of the discourse? Bearing these in mind, we raise the following research questions:

(a) What speech roles advertisers take up as is reflected in the choice of mood and modality in the target discourse?

(b) What roles do advertisers project to the audience and themselves as is reflected in the person system?

Six hundred samples of 31,159 words are studied in the present research. The sources of data are: print PSAs from newspapers, magazines and billboards, PSAs broadcast on TV and files quoted from books and journal articles. The paralanguage such as pitch, volume and intonation, and the image are not taken into account in the present study, although they also have an important role to play.

3. INTERPERSONAL MEANINGS REALIZED BY MOOD AND MODALITY

In the study of mood system, clause is the basic unit under investigation, since it is "the central processing unit in the lexicogrammar." (Hallliday & Matthiessen, 2008, p.10) It is usually marked by colons, semi-colons or commas. There are 2,121 clauses identified in our corpus, among which 1,831 clauses have declarative mood, accounting for 86.3%. This is followed by 209 imperatives (9.9%) and 81 interrogatives (3.8%).

3.1 Declarative Mood

Declaratives serve the purpose of giving information to change the state of knowledge of the audience. In the following example, the advertiser appeals to the audience

by showing the seriousness of the problem. See example (1)

(1) Ta zai shua ya, ta zai xi lian, ta zai tuo di ban, ta zai cuo yi fu. Ta zai...Ke neng ta zhen de bu zhi dao, jiu kuai mei shui le. Jie shui, cong sheng huo dian di kai shi.

[He is brushing his teeth. He is washing his face. He is mopping the floor. He is doing the laundry. He is ...... Maybe he really does not know that water has almost been exhausted. Let's conserve water in every aspect of our lives.]

This PSA depicts a person who leaves the tap running when he brushes his teeth and mopping the floor without knowing that water is in scarcity. The declaratives in it serve as statements of the fact. They do not have dialogic effect in this example, as in a lot of other cases. Advertisers do have other resources such as first and second person pronouns to create dialogic effect to get closer to the audience. More detailed analysis of the person system will be given in the next section.

3.2 Interrogatives

Interrogatives are more interactive in nature than declaratives, since they expect answers from the audience. The use of interrogatives can to a large extent engage the audience to achieve better communicative effects. Based on the previous studies of Chinese from the functional perspective, we identified three types of interrogatives in the Chinese language: question-word interrogative, yes-no interrogative and disjunctive interrogative (Li & Thompson, 1981; Li & Hu, 1989).

Among all the interrogatives in our corpus, the overwhelming majority are yes-no interrogatives, accounting for 62.97%, followed by question-word interrogatives at 34.57%. Only 2.46% are disjunctive interrogatives. The following discussion will only focus on the first two types of interrogatives.

Yes-no interrogatives expect a confirmation or a rejection. In Chinese, they are usually marked by the sentence final particle *ma* and *me,* and in many cases a rising intonation.

(2) Ni zhu yi zhe xie cha ju le me? Duo yi xie zun zhong, duo yi xie jiao liu.

[Have you noticed these differences? More respect, more communication.]

This is a PSA broadcast on CCTV, in which differences between parents and children are displayed, followed by the question "Have you noticed these differences?" shown on the screen. The question prompts the audience to examine their own behavior in a non-coercive way, an effect that would not be possible if it used sentence like " You should notice these differences between you and your children". Yes-no questions are not intimidating, as the answer to it involves two possibilities: positive or negative. They therefore do not carry, as "you should..." and "don't ..." patterns will do, the preconception that the target audience has a certain undesirable behavior.

Like Wh-interrogative in English, question-word interrogative in Chinese demands information concerning time, location, manner, person, etc. Since this type of interrogatives demand specific information from the audience, it functions to prompt the audience to stop and think and thus holding their attention for longer time than yes-no questions do.

3.3 Imperative Mood

Imperative mood is usually employed to command, request, urge and persuade (Lv, 1980). The following table provides examples of different types of imperatives in PSAs.

Table 1
Imperative Mood Used in PSA

Positive imperative		Negative imperative	
With mitigator	**Without mitigator**	**With mitigator**	**Without mitigator**
(3)...Hui jia, kan kan mu qin zui xin wei de xiao rong ba, na pa zhi shi da ge dian hua. [Would you go home to see your mother's smile or at least give her a call?]	(4)Wei le you ge mei hao de huan jing, gan kuai xing dong qi lai! [Take action, for a better environment!]	(5)Zuo ge guan ai ma ma, qing bu yao xi yan. [Be a loving mother. Please don't smoke.]	(6)Wu zhai hua cao, wei zhe fa kuan. [Don't pick flowers or you will be fined.]

Two broad categories are identified in our corpus: positive imperative (asking people to do something) and negative imperative (asking people not to do something). Of the 209 imperative clauses, 144 are positive imperatives, accounting for 68.9%, which means the advertisers tend to commit the audience to a certain action.

Mitigators play an important role in imperative clauses. In Chinese, sentence final particles such as *ba*, *ya* and *ma* and other lexical items such as *qing* (please) are used to soften the condescending tone carried by imperatives.

Of all the positive imperatives, 76 are imperatives without mitigators, while 68 have mitigators. Of all the negative imperatives, 75.4% have no mitigators,, which implies that advertisers tend to ask the audience not to do something in a harsh tone.

3.4 Interpersonal Meanings Realized by Modality

Modality refers to the area of meaning that lies between yes and no-the intermediate ground between positive and negative polarity (Halliday, 2000). It is further divided into modalization and modulation. Modalization indicates

the speaker's attitude towards what s/he is saying. It is the way the speaker expresses a judgment about the certainty, likelihood or frequency of a proposition. Modulation is used to argue about the obligation or inclination of proposals.

The use of modality is summarized in the following table.

Table 2
The Use of Modality in PSA

Modality				
Modalization		Modulation		
Probability	Usuality	Obligation		Inclination
		Positive	Negative	
56	10	24	75	10
32%	5.7%	56.6%		5.7%

This table demonstrates the distribution of modal expressions in our corpus. On the one hand, it is clear that the use of modulation dominates over modalization, which means the advertisers tend to tell the audience what they are obliged or expected to do in a very explicit way. It is also worth noting that 75.8% of those expressions that indicate obligation are in negative form, which means the advertiser has the tendency of preaching about what people should not do. What is more, the majority of modal expressions are used in imperatives, while a small number of them take *wo men* (we) as subject. See example (7) and (8):

(7)   Niao lei shi ren lei de peng you, wo men ying gai ai hu ta.
[Birds are humans' friends. We should love and protect them.]

(8)   Gao chu zuo ye, yao zhu yi an quan. An quan lai zi jing ti, shi gu chu yu ma bi.
[Watch out when working in high places. Safety comes from cautiousness, accident from   carelessness.]

Modalization in imperatives, like *yinggai* (should)and *yao* (should) in these examples carries strong authoritative stance and therefore too much of it will cause antipathy on the part of the audience. By using *wo men* (we) as the subject in example (7), the advertiser puts himself in the audience's shoes by holding himself accountable for the action advocated. The equality established will bet o a large extent contribute to the effectiveness of the PSA.

4. INTERPERSONAL MEANING REALIZED BY THE PERSON SYSTEM

The advertiser-audience relationship is also codified in the way advertisers name themselves and the audience. The person system, properly managed, can help construct close relationship between the advertiser and the audience, which improve the persuasive effect of advertisements (Zhu, 2003).

The use of personal pronouns and other address terms in our corpus is displayed in the following table.

Table 3
The Use of Person System in PSA

Personal pronoun/ address term	Wo	Wo men	Inclusive wo men	Ni	Nin	Ni men	Da jia	Jun	Peng you	Total
Number	127	4	93	117	36	1	11	3	3	395
Percentage	32.2%	1%	23.5%	29.6%	9%	0.3%	2.8%	0.8%	0.8%	

Note. There are some dialogues between characters in the PSA. Address terms and personal pronouns used in these dialogues are not included in our statistics because they do not play an important role in the construction of advertiser-audience relationship.

Generally speaking, the use of personal pronouns add to the dialogic effect of PSA in which the advertiser and audience are actually not visible to each other. The effect of personal pronouns vary widely in different contexts. It is found that *ni* is the default pronoun to address the audience, as is probably true in natural speech. However, the choice of this neutral pronoun is not always appropriate. In cases where a negative comment is directed at the audience or a negative imperative is used, *ni* serves to intensify the condescending tone on the part of the advertiser. Thus the use of *nin*, which indicates deference is a better choice, as in the following example.

(9)   Wei le **nin** he ta ren de jian kang, qing gai diao sui di tu tan de huai xi guan.
[Please quit the bad habit of spitting, for the health of you and others.]

This is a PSA that targets at those who have a bad habit, as is explicitly specified in the advert. The mention of "bad habit" is offensive enough to elicit aversion. The use of *nin* in this case helps to minimize the offense.

Another point worth noting is the use of *wo men* (we) and *inclusive wo men* (inclusive we). *Wo men* can be used to refer to the organization which issues the advert, while *inclusive wo men* serves to hold both the advertiser and the audience responsible for a certain action. An equality will be established between the advertiser and the audience by the use of *inclusive wo men* and thus contributing to the communicative effect of the PSA. See example (10):

(10)   Wei le zi ji he ta ren de jian kang, **wo men** dou ying dang zun shou gong de.
[We should all live up to the moral standard, for the health of us and others.]

CONCLUSION

PSA is a discourse type with strong persuasive purpose. The advertiser therefore seeks to achieve a dialogic effect to reach out to the audience. The use of imperative

mood and interrogative mood or the first and second personal pronouns and address terms serves this purpose very well. However, it is not without problems. First, our statistics show that most of the negative imperatives are used without mitigators, which means the advertiser tends to assume an authoritative role and impose their own ideology on the audience. Second, in the choice of modality among probability, usuality, obligation and inclination, more than half is the expression of obligation, which means the advertiser chooses command over negotiation in their communication with the audience. Third, the most striking feature in the use of personal pronoun is the use of *inclusive wo men*, which serve to commit both the advertiser and the audience to the same action. It shows the effort of the advertisers to establish equality with the audience to achieve a better persuasive effect.

The present study extends the applicability of systemic functional linguistics to the analysis of Chinese discourse and complements previous studies on this discourse type from a linguistic perspective. It will hopefully shed lights on the production and evaluation of PSAs. One of the limitations of the present study is that the function of picture, voice and other paralinguistic factors are not given due attention. This will be attended to in the multi-modal analysis of PSAs in our future research.

REFERENCES

Eggins, S. (2004). *An introduction to systemic functional linguistics*. London: Continuum.

Gao, P. (1999). *An exploration of public service advertising*. Beijing: China Commerce Press.

Halliday, M. A. K. (2000). *An introduction to functional grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Li, C., & Thompson, S. (1981). *Mandarin Chinese: A functional reference grammar*. Los Angeles, CA: University of Clifornia Press.

Li, S. J., & Hu, Z. L. (1990). Mood and interrogative mood in Chinese. In Z. Z. L. Hu (Eds.). *Language system and function*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.

Lv, S. X. (1980). *On 800 words in modern Chinese*. Beijing, China: The Commercial Press.

Martin, J. R., & White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Pan, Z. H. (2001). *An introduction to public service advertising*. Beijing: China Radio Film & TV Press.

Song, Y. S. (2001). *An overview of public service advertising*. Shenyang, China: Liaoning People's Press.

Thompson, G. (2000). *Introducing functional grammar*. Beijing, China: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

Zhang, M. X. (2004). *The secret of public service advertising*. Guangzhou, China: Guangdong Economics Press.