

A Study of Parents' Ostensible Praise in Adolescent Families*

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Abstract—Parents' ostensible praise is a pervasive yet intricate speech act in parent-child communication, which diverges significantly from authentic praise and carries implicit evaluations and veiled expectations, which impedes effective parent-child communication to a certain extent. Based on conjoint co-constituting model of communication and the *guanxi* space as theoretical frameworks, this paper discovers 5 types of ostensible praise including extreme praise, perfunctory praise, results-oriented praise, comparative praise and frequent praise from authentic data. The findings of this study are empirical endeavours in interpersonal pragmatics and can offer valuable guidance for families to improve parent-adolescent relationships through improvement of discursive practices.

Index Terms—ostensible praise, speech act, conjoint co-constituting model of communication, the *guanxi* space

I. INTRODUCTION

Today, parents have begun to increasingly favour an encouraging educational approach, which is a stark contrast to the traditional authoritative style. Praise plays a pivotal role and significantly impacts the process of encouraging children to pursue their education. However, the effective deployment of praise has not been universally mastered by parents. On the contrary, excessive and ill-considered praise can yield detrimental outcomes. This type of praise, which is devoid of sincerity, is motivated by parents' needs for their children to engage in certain actions and their comparisons and evaluations of other children. Consequently, such praise is ostensible. By conducting a comprehensive review of the existing literature, the authors found that the research on ostensible praise mainly focused on psychology and family education. Therefore, this essay discusses the types of ostensible praise that occur in family conversations between parents and adolescents under the guidance of the conjoint co-constituting model of communication and *guanxi* space. The intention is to provide guidance for parents on how to offer praise in appropriate and effective ways and foster a harmonious family environment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Literature Review of the Ostensible Speech Act

Since Austin (1962) proposed the speech act theory, the speech act theory has become one of the core topics in the field of linguistics and has helped researchers achieve fruitful results (Xia et al., 2022). Previous scholars mainly paid attention to general speech acts, such as apologies (Murphy, 2015; Liu et al., 2016), suggestions (Liu et al., 2019), refusals (Han, 2021), and so on. In recent years, scholars have also focused on the opposition of the general speech act, which was the ostensible speech act—namely, the insincere speech act. The authors found that the studies of ostensible speech acts mostly focused on ostensible invitations and ostensible refusals by researching the literature. This literature consists of pragmatic analyses of ostensible invitations and ostensible refusals (Zhang, 2018; Zhang, 2017; Yu & Zhang, 2011; Zhang et al., 2011; Ran & Lai, 2014; Zhao & Li, 2004) and their comparative analyses (Lai & Ran, 2013). The earliest research abroad on ostensible speech acts was conducted by Isaacs and Clark (1990). Subsequent researchers shifted their focus to the pragmatic characteristics of ostensible invitations (Guo & Sang, 2019; Al-Hindawi et al., 2017) and comparative analyses (Salmani-Nodoushan, 2006). Several decades later, a group of researchers (Su, 2020) conducted a comparative analysis on true refusals and ostensible refusals. In general, the research on ostensible speech acts is still scattered.

B. Literature Review of Praise

Praise as a kind of vital speech act plays an important role in maintaining human relationships in addition to performing other functions. Research on compliment speech acts generally focuses on the response to praise at home and abroad (Shi, 2017; Xia et al., 2021; Mustapha, 2011; Danziger, 2018; Lin et al., 2012; Cheng, 2011; Chen & Yang, 2010) and praise speech acts specifically (Placencia & Eslami, 2020; Zhang, 2008; Yang, 2020; Duan, 2011). In recent years, limited

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literature on ostensible praise has been published. The available literature about parents' ostensible praise for children in adolescent families is relatively scant.

Nevertheless, parents' ostensible praise for children has become a pervasive phenomenon. This trend, which parents offer their children ostensible praise, has gradually drawn people's attention because such praise may have negative effects on adolescents. Therefore, this essay mainly focuses on parents' ostensible praise for children in adolescent families.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study mainly applies the conjoint co-constituting model of communication and the model of *guanxi* space to explore the phenomenon of parents' ostensible praise in adolescent families.

Arundale (1999, 2006, 2010) proposed the conjoint co-constituting model of communication and pointed out that people co-constituted certain knowledge in face-to-face interaction. This model focuses on people's reciprocal co-creation of meanings and actions. This model also prioritizes the listener's understanding of communicative meanings, so this highlights the perspectives of the participants.

Arundale (2010) noted that interlocutors mutually restricted each other in communication and that their interpretation and design of their discourse impacted the communicative process, which helped to finish the conjoint co-constituting of meanings and actions. The conjoint co-constituting model of communication contains three core principles, including the adjacent placement principle (APP), the sequential interpreting principle (SIP), and the recipient design principle (RDP). The APP maintains that the participants' discourse is next to the prior utterance; the SIP maintains that the recipients of the discourse integrate their interpretations of the prior utterances into the adjoining conversational sequences, and the RDP maintains that the participants form their own utterances according to their interpretations of the discourse and others' possible expectations. This model can be used to analyze verbal behaviours.

Yuan (2021) pointed out that the concept of identity in Chinese culture viewed identity as existing in *space* because the social relations in China were based on ethics and reason. Therefore, people's identities need to be put in *guanxi* space, which contains four quadrants that are formed by the status axis and intimacy axis (see Figure 1).

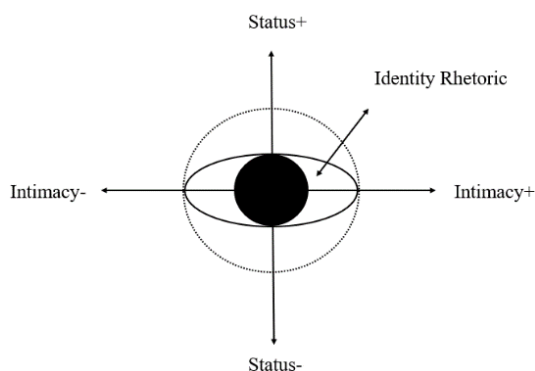


Figure 1. The Model of *Guanxi* Space

In *guanxi* space, the communicator's identity is in the central circle. The horizontal axis indicates whether the communicative target is far away or intimate to the speaker, and the vertical axis indicates whether the communicative target's status is higher or lower than the speaker's status. Additionally, people can utilize different language resources to construct appropriate identities and realize their communicative goals.

In adolescent families, parents' praise can be a kind of verbal violence. However, adolescents can discern whether their parents' praise is sincere, and they can also respond to ostensible praise. Therefore, this essay mainly discusses how adolescents respond to different kinds of ostensible praise by using the conjoint co-constituting model of communication. Simultaneously, this essay also discusses how parents' identities dynamically change in *guanxi* space.

IV. DATA SOURCES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A. Data Sources

The empirical basis of this article was built on recordings that were obtained from naturally occurring interactions within adolescent (10–15 years old) families and an authentic corpus from the author's supervisor's research project. So far, the recordings comprise 25 text segments that contain 2,382 characters. It is expected that an additional 25 text segments with 4,500 characters will be collected. The data has been transcribed based on Gail Jefferson's (1984) transcription system.

B. Data Annotation

The analysis of the data was conducted using quantitative and qualitative methods and the NVivo software, which was used to analyze the collected valid data in terms of classes from bottom to top. Two specific annotation methods were used:

1. The collected data was converted into textual versions and then labelled based on the conjoint co-constituting model of communication's three core principles.
2. The annotated data was organized.

C. Research Questions

This study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What types of parents' ostensible praise exist?
2. How do adolescents respond to their parents' ostensible praise based on the conjoint co-constituting model of communication and how do the parents' identities change in guanxi space?
3. What pragmatic meanings do parents' ostensible praise create?

V. THE TYPES OF OSTENSIBLE PRAISE

Adolescents' development is a process that involves self-awareness and constant correction. Therefore, adolescents often perceive themselves through the feedback given to them by their parents. In many modern families, parents are aware that traditional educational methods are not suitable for their children, so many have decided to use encouraging educational methods. However, these parents have not mastered the essence of encouraging education. They typically inappropriately apply praise as a common method in encouraging education. Therefore, in adolescent families, multiple types of ostensible praise exist.

Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of types of ostensible praise that are used by parents in adolescent families. This figure demonstrates that many parents favour using extreme and perfunctory praise. Many parents also use results-oriented and comparative praise but do not use frequent praise as often according to the collected data. Figure 3 depicts the co-constitution principles adolescents use in their responses to their parents' ostensible praises. It points out that adolescents often instantly respond to their parents' praise. They have their own interpretations of their parents' praise, and they can also design their own sequences based on their needs. However, their use of SIP may not be ideal due to the nature of their relationships and their status with their parents.

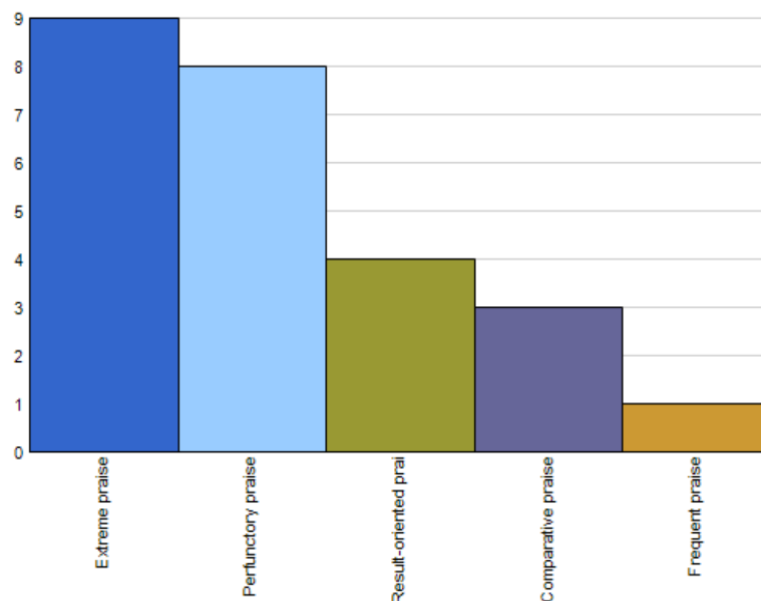


Figure 2. Types of Ostensible Praise

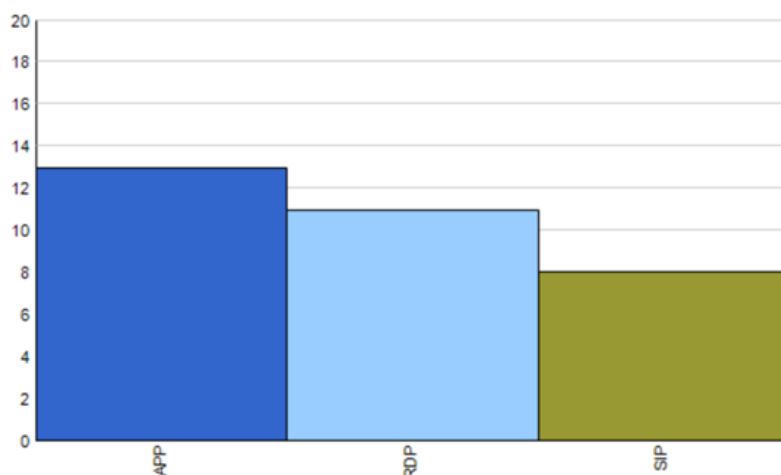


Figure 3. The Three Core Principles of the Conjoint Co-Constituting Model of Communication

The following sections describe some of the main types of ostensible praise that are used by parents. This essay also presents an analysis of adolescents' responses to their parents' ostensible praise based on the conjoint co-constituting model of communication that incorporates specific data segments and the parents' identity changes in *guanxi* space.

A. Extreme Praise

Extreme praise involves parents using exaggerated and overly complimentary language or words to describe adolescents. They often use words such as “most”, “must”, “very”, “extremely”, and so on. The meanings of these words usually extend beyond the real situations that parents are describing or what are generally accepted.

Excerpt 1 (Before the final exam, a mom tries to relieve her daughter's nervous mind):

01 Mom: *My daughter is the best; you must be able to play your part well.*

02 Daughter: *Mom, when you say this, it doesn't feel like you are comforting*

03 *me but like you are reminding me that I can't make mistakes. ↓*

In Excerpt 1, after the mother expresses that her daughter will certainly be able to perform well on an exam, her daughter instantly responds during the next turn. The mother hopes that her praise can relieve her daughter's psychological pressure about the exam. However, from the daughter's perspective, her understanding of her mother's words does not correspond with her mother's expectations. Then the daughter designs her own response. She does not interpret her mother's words as a form of encouragement or solace because she says, “*It doesn't feel like comforting me*”. Instead, she views her mother's words as a reminder that she must perform flawlessly on the exam (“*but like reminding me that I can't make mistakes ↓*”). Therefore, the meaning of the discussion has not been jointly co-constituted by the two parties, and the mother's praise does not play its role. This extreme praise is ostensible.

Moreover, in *guanxi* space, the daughter's identity is in the central circle. The mother's use of “*My daughter*” means that she maintains a close relationship with her daughter (Intimacy+). However, the mother's praise constructs her identity as a reminder, which implies that the mother holds a higher status (Status+) than the daughter does. Therefore, the mother's identity in extreme praise is in the first quadrant of *guanxi* space. The mother, who uses extreme praise, does not realize her communicative goals, and this may cause problems in maintaining the family's harmony.

B. Perfunctory Praise

Perfunctory praise involves parents failing to earnestly engage in the act of praising their children, they often display a lack of genuine interest or investment in the process. Typically, parents offer such praise in a cursory manner because they are preoccupied with their own activities, which demonstrates an arbitrary attitude towards their children's achievements.

Excerpt 2 (A mother checks her child's handwriting that practiced before at night):

01 Mom : *Xiao Tao is so great. ↑ (Closing the text)*

02 Xiao Tao: *Mom, is there anything else you want to say? Do you see that*

03 *I've written these words more neatly?*

04 Mom : *Ah(.) If you don't say it, I really don't see it; our Xiao Tao is so*

05 *great(.) (Gives Xiao Tao a thumbs up. ↑)*

In Excerpt 2, at first, the mother just glances at her daughter's handwriting, then she only makes positive comments toward Xiao Tao. Xiao Tao notices that her mother is not paying attention to her handwriting. She does not accept her mother's statement (“*Xiao Tao is so great ↑*”), and she also does not respond in a way that corresponds with her mother's expectations. Instead, Xiao Tao puts forward her own needs by saying that her mother should say something else (Line 02). She also points out the specific aspect that she wants her mother to address in Line 03. After listening to these words, the mother adjusts her statement, which demonstrates that she is not focusing on Xiao Tao's expectations. She notices

what her daughter says but still does not respond to her daughter appropriately. The mother does not construct conjoint discursive meaning, so her perfunctory praise is ostensible.

In *guanxi* space, the mother uses the nickname “*Xiao Tao*” to address her daughter. The daughter also uses the kinship term “*Mom*” to indicate that she has an intimate relationship with her mother (Intimacy+). In Line 02, *Xiao Tao* asks her mother to satisfy her emotional needs, which means the mother’s identity has low status (Status-). Therefore, the mother’s identity in perfunctory praise is in the fourth quadrant of *guanxi* space. If the mother can appropriately handle her praise, she could create a more harmonious relationship with her daughter.

C. Results-Oriented Praise

Results-oriented praise involves parents only praising their children for positive performance results rather than the efforts children put into their work before achieving positive outcomes.

Excerpt 3 (During the weekend, *Xiao Zhi* shows his mother his exam scores):

01 Mom: *You are so smart; you scored 80 points. I believe that you will get*

02 *90 points next time.*↑

03 *Xiao Zhi: I’m “not a smart person” ; “I received good grades just*

04 *because I studied diligently.”*

In Excerpt 3, the mother praises her son for receiving a relatively good grade. She believes that her son can receive 90 points next time based on Lines 01 and 02. However, *Xiao Zhi* does not interpret his mother’s words as expected. He denies his mother’s statement (“*You are so smart*”) by stating, “*I’m not a smart person*”. He further states that the reason he receives a good grade is because he studies diligently. *Xiao Zhi* recognizes that his mother’s thoughts about him are incorrect. Therefore, in his reply, he reinterprets this aspect of the situation for his mother. Based on this reinterpretation, *Xiao Zhi* understands that his mother’s results-oriented praise is ostensible, and he also expresses his own ideas about receiving good grades to change his mother’s thoughts.

In *guanxi* space, both the mother and *Xiao Zhi* do not use kinship terms or endearments, the mother just uses the second-person pronoun “you” to address her son, while her son does not address his mother. Therefore, the two parties have low intimacy (Intimacy-). Simultaneously, the mother does not recognize *Xiao Zhi*’s diligence and only comments on *Xiao Zhi* himself. She constructs her identity as a commentator and goal-maker, which indicates her high status (Status+). Thus, the mother’s identity is in the second quadrant of *guanxi* space. The relationship between the mother and son might worsen in the future if the two parties continue to not understand each other.

D. Comparative Praise

Comparative praise involves parents praising their children ostensibly because they are comparing their own children to others with the intention of motivating them to improve.

Excerpt 4 (The child makes progress in dance at their school):

01 Mom: *Your dancing has improved today in comparison to last time.*

02 *Look at the other students in your class who can dance well; Mom*

03 *believes in you as long as you work hard. You also can dance well*

04 *next time; even you can dance better than others, can’t you.*↑

05 Kid: *But mom, why can’t you just focus on my progress? Why do you*

06 *have to compare me with others?*↑

In Excerpt 4, the mother compares her daughter’s dancing performance to her last one through praise. She believes that this can encourage her daughter to dance better during her next lesson. She thinks that her daughter will interpret her words as encouragement and that her daughter will promise that she will dance better the next time. However, the daughter interprets her mother’s praise as a comparison (Lines 05 and 06). She also tries to ask her mother to focus on her progress, which is her initial need. Based on the daughter’s perspective, the mother’s comparative praise is insincere.

In *guanxi* space, the mother uses the tekonymy “mom” to address herself, which helps her to maintain an intimate relationship with her daughter (Intimacy+). However, the mother constructs her identity as a demander. Although she praises her daughter for dancing well, her real aim is to require her daughter to dance better, which forms a high status for the mother (Status+). Therefore, the mother’s identity is in the first quadrant of *guanxi* space. If the mother wants to become closer to her daughter, she needs to lower her status.

E. Frequent Praise

Frequent praise involves parents consistently giving praise to their children, whether for overcoming significant challenges or for engaging in routine, everyday actions.

Excerpt 5 (Over the weekend, a mother takes her two children to eat cakes outside the library. The two siblings are sitting on some chairs and eating cheesecake, and the younger brother smears the cake not only on his face but also on his eyebrows and head. Next, he clumsily wipes off the cake with a paper towel. In contrast, the sister just has some crumbs on the corners of her mouth, but she quickly wipes them off. At this moment, the mother comes back from the restroom.):

01 Mom: *Wow(.) It’s really nice of you to take the initiative to wipe your*

02 *mouth after eating.*↑

03 Sister: Mom, can you praise something else?↓

In Excerpt 5, the mother praises her children for wiping their mouths after eating. The mother believes that her children will be happy after hearing her praise, but the daughter interprets the mother's praise as a factual description. The daughter points out that she wants to hear "something else" be praised by her mother. In Excerpt 5, the daughter's interpretation does not correspond with the mother's expectations, so the mother's frequent praise is ostensible.

In *guanxi* space, the mother tries to maintain an identity with high intimacy and low status (Intimacy+/Status-) by praising her children's daily behaviours. Therefore, her identity is in the fourth quadrant of *guanxi* space. However, because her praise is insincere, the result is not what her daughter and she expected.

VI. THE PRAGMATIC MEANING OF OSTENSIBLE PRAISE

In adolescent families, children can recognize their parents' ostensible praise to some extent and can refute it. Extreme praise that is characterized by the use of adverbs that denote the highest degree indirectly imposes psychological pressure on adolescents, which hinders effective communication between parents and children. This form of praise fails to fulfil its intended purpose because it fosters tension rather than positive rapport. Perfunctory praise incisively and vividly reflects parents' indifference to their children. Parents who offer results-oriented praise only focus on whether the results of their children's behaviour are satisfactory enough and ignore the efforts their children have already made. Parents who provide comparative praise compare their children with others to motivate their children to reach a level of success that they have not achieved before. Frequent praise, although it may initially be used to provide positive reinforcement, may also lead to children becoming reliant on constant praise. However, when children do not receive praise for something that they believe is worthy of praise, they may become sceptical of their previous experiences and even go to extremes.

By learning about the different types of ostensible praise, parents can realize that while communicating with their children, they need to avoid expressions of ostensible praise and offer sincere praise to their children. Simultaneously, parents should also realize that they should not only praise their children but also make the praise meaningful and valuable rather than use it as a kind of verbal violence. Parents should try to strike a balance between offering praise and ensuring the sincerity of the praise to create healthy parent-child relationships.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study mainly discusses five types of ostensible praise: extreme praise, perfunctory praise, results-oriented praise, comparative praise, and frequent praise. It incorporates the conjoint co-constituting model of communication and *guanxi* space into the discussion of these types of ostensible praise. The authors found that adolescents responded to their parents' ostensible praise during their turns and that they did not respond as their parents expected them to. Adolescents can understand their parents' real meanings and put forward their own needs. To some extent, adolescents' understandings and interpretations are important in discourse. Additionally, parents' identities also change in *guanxi* space. In fact, parents' praise does not have active effects, which is not always conducive to communication between parents and their children. This study can help parents improve their expressions and word choices when praising their children. It can also help parents understand that their children's behaviours should be met with sincere praise, not ostensible praise. However, this study is limited by its selection of finite data, future researchers may wish to collect more data to identify more types of ostensible praise.

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