A study of the pragmatic strategies of observational variety show hosts

Chen Yizhuo

School of Communication, Yunnan Normal University, Kunming, China
Yizhuochen214@gmail.com

Abstract: As a key form of contemporary television entertainment, observational variety shows attract significant academic attention. The pragmatic strategies used by their hosts are a major focus of study. This paper aims to utilize the theory of pragmatic strategy within the field of pragmatics to explore the techniques used by these hosts. It is hoped that the insights presented will assist hosts and production teams better understand audience needs and expectations, ultimately enhancing their appeal and influence.

Keywords: Observation-type variety show; Host; pragmatic strategy

1. Introduction

Observation-type variety shows are a form of entertainment designed to allow the audience to observe and evaluate the behavior, interactions, or performances of specific subjects, situations, or individuals. Audience members are encouraged to think critically about and analyze participants' interactions and performances in various contexts. The content of these shows encompasses a wide range of topics, including reality shows, social observations, and hidden camera segments.

With the recent popularity of "slow variety shows," the perspective of "observation" has become increasingly prominent, leading to numerous observational variety shows. Programs such as "Where Are We Going, Dad?", "My Daughter," "My Son," and "We Are the Newbies" have garnered significant attention. Since their launch, these shows have sparked extensive discussions among audiences online, influencing the continuity and depth of related social topics such as parent-child relationships, romantic relationships, and workplace dynamics.

This paper seeks to apply the theory of pragmatic strategies within pragmatics to explore the techniques utilized by hosts of observational variety shows. It is hoped that the insights presented will not only help hosts and production teams better understand audience needs and expectations but also significantly enhance the appeal and influence of these shows.

2. Pragmatic strategies in "Back to Field"

Liu Senlin defines pragmatic strategies as "the means or ways by which language users achieve communicative purposes by selecting speech structures in a certain context to produce specific speech meanings, which fall within the scope of research on pragmatic competence."[1] This article draws on Liu Senlin's insights from his book Pragmatic Strategies for its analysis. In observational variety shows, effective pragmatic strategies are primarily evident in the host's skillful control of the environment, natural interactions with guests, and the warmth and humor fostered by the production team. These strategies enhance the program's relatability to the audience. Additionally, the host employs pragmatic strategies of emotional resonance by sharing personal experiences from rural life, expressing his love for nature and rural living. This evokes emotional connections with the audience and increases the program's appeal.

2.1. Discourse control strategy

The moderator's discourse control strategy involves managing situations where a listener may need to interrupt the current speaker to express their thoughts. In such instances, the current addressee must employ specific, pragmatic strategies to obtain the "right to speak" from the current speaker. In

programs like Back to Field, multiple hosts and guests create a dynamic dialogue characterized by various perspectives and topics, which facilitates the frequent use of crowd control strategies. Moderators' Standard techniques to manage the discourse include tail suggestions and semantic supplementation.

2.1.1. Tail suggestions

Tail suggestions refer to interrupting a speaker without pause when the listener perceives the speaker is about to conclude. This involves proposing a suggestion as a suitable ending at a point that is not yet finished but is nearing completion or a grammatical critical juncture, allowing the listener to gain the right to speak and effectively control the situation. In the corn-picking scene, He Jiong remarked, "Are you full? Then have another one," and noted the challenges with their limited tools, stating, "Right now, it's because we don't have the tools, so we have to go back and forth." Huang Lei then skillfully took the floor with a tail suggestion, asking, "Are you done picking? How many did you pick?" This timely intervention allowed him to provide an appropriate conclusion before the conversation became overly redundant, effectively managing the dialogue.

2.1.2. Semantic complementation method

Semantic complementation involves the listener supplementing the meaning of the speaker's current words at the appropriate moment, regardless of whether the words are complete. This strategy is employed when the listener believes that the speaker has not clearly expressed their meaning or when the listener already understands the substance of what the speaker intends to convey based on existing information.

In the corn-picking scene, after Liu Xianhua said "start," Jiong's voice had not yet ceased. He tactfully seized the "right to speak" by accurately anticipating Liu Xianhua's following words, demonstrating effective use of semantic complementation within the field control strategy. As a result, Liu Xianhua's discourse was supplemented, allowing He Jiong to gain the floor, even if that was not his initial intention.

Overall, Back to Field is a slow-paced observational variety show. Although the host has a general understanding of the program's framework and expected outcomes before recording, many details or unexpected situations can arise on-site that cannot be predicted.[2] The tactics used to dominate the show and seize the spotlight are not as intense as those found in typical variety shows, interview programs, or debate formats. Instead, they are less subtle than those in cultural variety shows or evening programs, focusing more on showcasing a natural and intuitive interaction approach.

2.2. Polite language strategies

Polite language strategies aim to maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships through conversational implicature. These strategies can effectively enhance intimacy or adjust the psychological distance between communicators. In the program, the host must establish a positive and harmonious relationship with the guests to minimize conflicts and friction unrelated to the show's content. Achieving this goal relies heavily on polite, pragmatic strategies, including adherence to principles of politeness and decency that the host must observe.

2.2.1. Polite principles

The principle of politeness was proposed in 1983 by the renowned British scholar Geoffrey Leech[3] in his book Principles of Pragmatics. Leech also believes that [3] Leech posits that the principles of cooperation and politeness are foundational to effective communication. In the program, the principle of politeness demonstrated by the host primarily manifests in two ways: the rule of praise, which emphasizes minimizing disparagement of others and maximizing praise, and the generous standard, which focuses on benefiting oneself minimally while avoiding harm to others maximally.

For example, a comedian, Shen Teng, subtly reflects the rule of praise through the implied meanings in his conversation. When he addresses Zhang Zifeng, who is significantly younger, he uses ambiguity to lead the listener to interpret his words in multiple ways, creating the impression that he grew up watching her films. Although this may initially undermine conversational quality, Shen Teng's subsequent semantic supplementation clarifies the implied meaning, effectively transforming it into a compliment. This acknowledges Zhang Zifeng's remarkable achievements in the industry at a young age. By appropriately applying the rule of praise, Shen Teng successfully bridges the psychological distance with Zhang Zifeng.

2.2.2. Propriety principles

The propriety principle refers to maintaining adaptability between discourse and its contextual environment in verbal activities, representing the highest standard among pragmatic principles. Decency serves as a criterion for evaluating both speech delivery and reception effectiveness.[4]

For instance, He Jiong playfully refers to Shen Teng as "my uncle," expressing respect and camaraderie while aligning with Shen Teng's identity as a comedian. Additionally, He Jiong adopts a relaxed and humorous tone appropriate to the relationship between Shen Teng and Ma Li, which complements the entertaining nature of the program. "My" signifies a sense of belonging, emphasizing He Jiong's active role as the host and highlighting the intimacy of his relationship with Shen Teng and Ma Li.

Overall, He Jiong employs language that is contextually appropriate, selecting terms and expressions that align with the identities and roles of Shen Teng and Ma Li. This choice fosters smooth and natural communication. It is worth noting that the polite language strategies exhibited by the host of Back to Field are often nuanced. Regardless of adherence to the principle of politeness, the speaker's words carry implied meanings that are not directly expressed. A polite pragmatic strategy involves the speaker achieving their communicative purpose through implied, euphemistic, or subtle meanings, thereby fostering a harmonious and pleasant social interaction environment, where everyone feels comfortable and at ease.

2.3. Ambiance creation strategy

The ambiance creation strategy refers to the host's skillful use of various pragmatic strategies to establish the atmosphere and style of the program. The atmosphere can be seen as a barometer of the program's theme and style, with the host playing a crucial role in continuously deepening and affirming these elements throughout the program's flow. In Back to Field, the lighthearted and humorous characteristics of the show are attributed to the effective implementation of the host's pragmatic strategies for creating a vibrant atmosphere. This strategy involves innovative methods of interpreting words and generating verbal humor.

2.3.1. New method of interpreting a change of meaning

The core of the new method for interpreting a change of meaning lies in deliberately avoiding the usual meanings of words, fully utilizing the relationship between words and context, splitting words apart, and employing clever techniques to create new interpretations. This approach can trigger fresh associations in the audience's minds, leading to surprising revelations. In the hosting styles of Huang Lei, He Jiong, and others, this pragmatic strategy not only injects interest into the program but also encourages the audience to participate more actively in the dialogue.

For instance, Huang Lei asks, "Director, do you have a kite there?" the director replies, "Yes, 50 yuan." Huang Lei states, "I don't feel like cooking right now; I just want to have fun." He Jiong follows up with, "Are the two of us, who are 'disrespectful for being old,' appropriate for playing with kites here?" Huang Lei responds, "Yes." He Jiong adds, "I think it's been 20 or 30 years since I last flew a kite. As long as the kite is flying, I feel very excited, as if I've suddenly become much younger and returned to the way I felt when I was a child."

In this exchange, He Jiong cleverly reinterprets the phrase "disrespect for the elderly," transforming a potentially derogatory term into a more positive and warm expression. This conveys that happiness knows no age and that childhood memories are pure. As a middle-aged man, He Jiong defies societal expectations of stability and engages in the joyful games of youth, resonating with the audience.

Additionally, He Jiong's use of irony to invert positive and negative connotations reflects a middle-aged man's nostalgia for fleeting childhood emotions while creating humor and a relaxed atmosphere. This corpus exemplifies subtle strategies for crafting the program's atmosphere and self-deprecating strategies—deliberately belittling one's own image. Such self-deprecation is often employed in humor to evoke sympathy or alleviate tension. In relaxed social contexts, moderate self-deprecation can trigger laughter and foster feelings of friendliness, making others more willing to support or care about the individual. Using the joke of 'disrespectful for being old,' He Jiong and Huang Lei, as the oldest hosts, effectively belittle themselves, creating a relaxed and engaging program dynamic.

2.3.2. The generation of verbal humor

The generation of verbal humor is a captivating process, achieved through the manipulation of context and the selection of rhetorical devices. Context manipulation often involves speakers deliberately violating the principle of best association, leading listeners to form false cognitive assumptions. By employing unexpected word choices and sentence structures, speakers create surprising effects that elicit humor and convey profound or subtle moods. Additionally, humor can be generated by selecting and combining various rhetorical devices, with the element of surprise playing a key role in the process.

For example, when Bai Baihe is chased by a puppy named H, He Jiong intervenes, playfully scolding the puppy. He uses alliteration in his reprimand, highlighting the puppy's mischief and contributing to the program's lighthearted atmosphere. The rhetorical device of collocation also comes into play, as He Jiong pairs words related to "sheep," "geese," and "chickens" with the action of "chasing" Bai Baihe. This alliterative structure transforms the mundane scenario of Bai Baihe being chased by a dog into a witty and amusing depiction, capturing the carefree essence of rural life and enhancing the program's relaxed ambiance.

The pragmatic strategies used to create the program's atmosphere are dynamic, often intertwining multiple approaches to foster a relaxed and enjoyable setting. Given the many hosts and guests in Back to Field, the variety of pragmatic strategies displayed is particularly notable, establishing the show's lighthearted, joyful, and non-utilitarian aesthetic.

3. Suggestions for the pragmatic strategies of hosts of observational variety shows

In Back to Field, the host's effective, pragmatic strategies are essential for shaping the program's style, theme, and atmosphere. However, it is important to adopt a dialectical perspective when evaluating the host's pragmatic strategy. This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these strategies function within the context of the program and their impact on audience engagement and interaction.

3.1. The effectiveness of discourse control

When the host employs discourse control, three main aspects come into play. First, maintaining dominance is crucial; the host should ensure they retain control of the conversation, allowing it to flow smoothly without excessive interruptions from guests or other participants. Second, guiding the topic is important; the host can steer the discussion by asking questions, summarizing points, or shifting topics to ensure the program progresses seamlessly. Third, clear expression is essential; the host must communicate logically and clearly, avoiding overly complex or obscure language to ensure all participants understand the conversation.

3.2. The variability of politeness strategies

Practicing polite language strategies is a cornerstone for establishing positive interpersonal relationships between the host and guests in observational variety shows. It is crucial to consider language usage across different contexts to ensure the appropriateness of the host's words and actions, especially in the rapidly evolving context of new media. Beyond the mere expression of words, hosts should strive for a balance between rationality and sensibility, aiming for a "net sense" in their speech. The subjunctive mood, paired with this "net sense," reflects a commitment to politeness in audiovisual communication and aligns with the principles of Internet discourse.

Moreover, given the presence of foreign artists like Liu Xianhua as guests, hosts must not only be attentive to context but also understand social etiquette and language nuances across different cultures. This understanding is crucial as it helps hosts avoid inappropriate topics or expressions, ensuring that their words and actions remain polite and suitable throughout the program.

3.3. The entertainment atmosphere is appropriate.

Creating a suitable program atmosphere is a key responsibility of the host. They should skillfully and flexibly employ various pragmatic strategies to establish the desired ambiance. However, over-dramatization can result in a program that feels contrived, compromising its realism and

naturalness. Viewers may sense this artificiality, which can undermine the program's credibility and appeal. Furthermore, an excessive focus on crafting an entertaining atmosphere may hinder the effective communication of the theme, making it difficult for the audience to truly understand and retain the core themes and values of the program.

4. Conclusions

This article uses Back to Field as a case study to analyze and summarize the pragmatic strategies employed by hosts of observational variety shows. These strategies are closely linked to the host's role orientation, particularly evident in the fluctuating "discourse power" throughout the program. Consequently, hosts must implement appropriate pragmatic strategies to manage the program's progression effectively. Regardless of the plan to align the atmosphere with the show's stylistic positioning, the primary goal remains fostering positive interpersonal relationships with the guests. Therefore, in the rapidly evolving landscape of new media, hosts of observational variety shows should judiciously utilize pragmatic strategies to achieve enhanced program outcomes.

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