

A Case Study on an Emerging Commentary Style of Animal World, a CCTV Program: From the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

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Abstract: Through observation, many official and local media accounts on Chinese short video platforms lack the appeal to the younger generation. The present study, adopting qualitative analysis and following the third wave of language variation study in sociolinguistics, aims to explore the innovation and functional mechanisms of an emerging commentary style of Animal World, a CCTV program, through a representative case to implicate their video productions. Analysis reveals that the creative employment of an official broadcasting tone and specific constructional features helps construct the video producer's persona as an online trendsetter, which is well welcomed by young net users. This finding suggests that when interacting with young netizens on short video platforms, official and local media accounts should adaptively prioritize the construction of certain appealing personae welcomed by them.

Keywords: sociolinguistics; language variation; style; persona; short video

DOI:10.69979/3041-0843.25.02.024

Introduction

In recent years, short videos have supplanted traditional TV programs, increasingly captured the favor of young people and become a primary medium for convenient global exploration. In this context, a series of commentary videos adapted from TV series and programs have emerged on short-video platforms. As a form of recreation, these videos typically involve editing, dubbing, and rearranging original content according to audience preferences. Notably, commentary videos derived from Animal World, a classic science-popularization program on China Central Television (CCTV), have developed a unique linguistic style on various short-video platforms. By retaining the official broadcasting tone while incorporating the informal linguistic features of buzzwords, these videos have garnered numerous likes and revived their science - popularization and educational value.

With the growing aggregation of users, predominantly young people, on short-video platforms, official accounts have been releasing short videos to guide and manage young netizens' ideology, and local media accounts have been promoting local culture and products. However, close observation reveals that most official and local media accounts on these platforms are struggling to attract their target audiences. Therefore, exploring the innovation mechanism of this emerging commentary style of TV programs is crucial for enhancing short-video production in the new media landscape. Meanwhile, in the 21st century, inspired by Eckert, the study of language variation in sociolinguistics has entered its third wave, shifting the focus to individual linguistic variables, especially style. This field examines social factors influencing language variation and the relationship between linguistic variables and social factors, aligning well with the objectives of this study. By identifying the linguistic variables of the emerging commentary style and interpreting its innovation and functional mechanisms within a specific social and cultural context through invoking certain instrumental concepts proposed in this field, this study aims to comprehensively explore the reasons for its popularity among young netizens and enlighten official and local media accounts in their video productions. Specifically, this study addresses three research questions: (1) What are the stylistic characteristics of the emerging commentary language in the selected case? (2) What are the innovation and functional mechanisms of the emerging commentary language in this case? (3) What implications do the findings have

for official and local media accounts in ideological education and local-culture promotion on short-video platforms?

1 Literature Review

1.1 Variationist Sociolinguistics

Language variation is a core issue in sociolinguistics research (Chambers, Trudgill, Schilling, 2004). Historically and metaphorically, it has formed three waves of language variation research during its long-term development process. The first wave, led by Labov, adopted quantitative statistical analysis methods and discovered extensive correlations between linguistic variables and macro-social categories, such as socioeconomic class, gender, class, ethnicity, and age. The second wave witnessed changes in research methods and views on language variation. Represented by Milroy and Eckert, it adopted the ethnographic method and uncovered the relationships between social networks, communities of practice, and language variation, beginning to introduce human agencies into variation research (Zhao Peng & Tian Hailong, 2022). Up to the 21st century, the third wave is characterized by a brand-new understanding of language variation, including stylistic variation. The third wave argues that stylistic variation constitutes a social semiotic system and is not a passive reflection of social changes but can also be used to construct social meanings and arouse social changes (Eckert, 2012).

In summary, in terms of research objects, the third wave pays more attention to language variation in individuals and analyzes this kind of language variation with individual differences in connection with emotions, personae, and identities of individual speakers. In terms of research methods, accordingly, the third wave adopts more case study and qualitative analysis of language variants and provides theoretical interpretations of how they construct social meanings.

1.2 Style

The third wave of language variation research usually starts from the study of “style” to explore the differences among various styles as well as the social meanings they possess. A critical social construct that has been invoked in the study of social meanings of style is “persona” (Annette, 2020). The third wave argues that linguistic variables are no longer merely regarded as passive markers of speakers' social categories, such as their age, sex, economic class. Instead, they are a series of resources through which speakers or listeners project social meanings and personae. These resources jointly form a style in the sociolinguistic sense. Especially in this era of virtual social interaction, style has become an important linguistic resource that people can utilize in communication within people in the virtual world. Boyd (2014) argues that in the online environment, since the communicating parties cannot directly observe each other's external features such as appearance, expressions, and body postures, the process of identity confirmation and negotiation becomes more difficult. In such a communication context, many online users construct specific identities and personae by employing specific linguistic features to shorten or widen the distance from others and gain others' recognition or express their own attitudes and positions.

Linguistic style is indexical in nature. According to Silverstein (2003), in the initial stage, a certain group attracts public attention due to demonstrating some prominent characteristics. Once these characteristics are recognized by the public, based on the multiple co-occurrences of the linguistic features and the corresponding groups, the public can isolate these linguistic features from the context in which they occur and directly associate them with the corresponding groups. At this point, these linguistic features acquire a social meaning. Over time and across contexts, these linguistic features can also gradually index to more abstract attributes, namely the ideological characteristics, such as the personality traits and stances of those groups. These associated social meanings jointly form an indexical order and indexical field of certain linguistic features or indexical signs over time. The members in this field are ideologically interrelated and can be activated across time and space in different situations (Eckert, 2008). It is in this sense that these stylistic features, or indexical signs, can be employed by other social groups to evoke stereotypes of a certain group in linguistic practice.

1.3 Persona

In definition, the construct, “personae”, refers to holistic, ideological social types that are recognizably linked with ways of being and speaking (Annette, 2020). In the long-term sociocultural practices, people will match certain social figures and their attributes with the linguistic styles or registers standing out in their language use and further start to

employ such linguistic styles or registers to construct their own specific persona thereby achieving their communicative purposes (Agha, 2003). Just as Eckert (2008) stated, the social function of style lies in the fact that it can be actively used by communicators to enact or re-enact certain persona, and it is these different personae that constitutes the whole social structure. Therefore, the study of style is naturally inseparable from the exploration of persona construction. For example, Heath (Podesva, 2007) constructed three personae: “son”, “professional doctor”, and “diva” for himself in three different situations: conversations with family members, conversations with patients, and parties with friends, by using falsetto and a series of voice quality features. A politician, Ed Miliband, constructed different social personae for himself by controlling the selective use of certain linguistic political features when facing different audiences (Kirkham & Moore, 2015).

Certainly, in addition to people's stylistic practices in the real world, the rapid development of new media has also extended language variation research to people's discourse practices in virtual spaces. Two Chinese scholars (Wang Yilei & Feng Dezheng, 2023) investigated how did a local media account on a short video platform construct a Chinese city as both a modern metropolis and historical city through multimodal stylistic practice, making it a celebrity city on the network. In a word, previous studies have underscored the social construction role of semiotic resources by linking linguistic variables to social personae or city images, which represent the enduring impressions of community members. However, these studies suffer from limitations. Their findings lack robust empirical support, as they often overlook a crucial aspect: the audience's response. Since all construction acts are audience-oriented, listener feedback should be integral to the analysis. For example, in Wang and Feng's research, the short-video cases presented received minimal likes and comments. This indicates a failure to achieve the intended communicative goals of attracting netizens' attention and prompting engagement, casting doubt on the effectiveness of the purported urban image construction on that platform. Therefore, the success of persona construction hinges on whether speakers achieve their overarching communicative purposes, and audience responses to his or her linguistic practices serve as objective evidence for evaluating the success of persona construction. To address this gap, the present study will take the audience's real-time responses and reactions into consideration and make our interpretations and conclusions more objective and persuasive.

2 Methodology

In line with the principle of sampling representativeness, this study selects the seventh episode of Hammer Animal Breeding Center, a collection of short videos released by a TikTok blogger on Chinese mainstream short-video platform TikTok. This episode was chosen due to its highest counts of likes, comments, favorites, and shares (Hai Xiaopeng, 2024). The built-in bullet screen feature on TikTok offers an immediate feedback channel for the audience, enabling them to express real-time thoughts and feelings. These reactions serve as evidence to assess whether the video producer has achieved their communicative objectives.

3 Discussion

The subsequent sections will elucidate the underlying innovation and functional mechanisms of the emerging commentary language through a case, adopting both macro- and micro-analytical perspectives. In the macro-analysis, the focus lies on the overarching stylistic features of the commentary language in the selected video, including vocal characteristics and language use patterns. These features are associated with the consistent online persona of a trendsetter. On the other hand, micro-analysis delves into the transient personae constructed by contextualizing specific stylistic elements. By presenting two illustrative examples from the case, this analysis interprets how these elements contribute to the formation of the overall persona.

3.1 Macro-analysis of the new commentary style

Through qualitative analysis of the commentary language in the selected video and comparative study with other commentary videos, this paper reveals that, at the macro level, the commentary language retains the broadcasting tone typical of CCTV programs in terms of vocal characteristics. However, in terms of language use, it exhibits the de-standardized features of buzzwords, which together constitute one of its distinct stylistic characteristics.

The "broadcasting tone" has been strongly associated with CCTV programs in the public consciousness due to its

frequent occurrence in various CCTV shows, such as news broadcasts and interviews. Over time, through repeated exposure, people have attributed multiple social meanings to this tone, forming an indexical field. This field includes associations like "topics discussed in this tone are usually serious, such as political and military affairs" and "language use accompanying this tone adheres strictly to standard language norms." Whenever this linguistic feature appears, any of these social meanings within the indexical field can be activated by both speakers and listeners. Consequently, the "broadcasting tone" generally evokes discourse characteristics of "serious topics" and "standard language use" in the Chinese audience's perception. In contrast to the formal "broadcasting tone," the de-standardized nature of buzzwords in this commentary language subverts these presuppositions, creating an incongruous yet innovative linguistic effect. In social networks, young people are at the vanguard of online culture. As a highly educated group with open and progressive minds, they show keen interest in social phenomena and events. They freely create and recreate numerous neologisms and expressions online to reflect social realities, express opinions, and vent emotions. Through prolonged linguistic practices on social media platforms, buzzwords have become closely linked to youth-dominated groups and subcultures due to their distinctive style.

Therefore, the seemingly rigid combination of de-standardized language use with the "broadcasting tone", not only counteracts the negative emotions brought about by this official tone but enables video producers to construct a prominent internet trendsetter persona by leveraging the indexical field of these two linguistic variables. In communication, young audiences will infer the producer's macro-social category based on the linguistic style and contextual cues. For instance, they might deduce that the speaker could be a college student or a recent graduate, around 20 years old, and likely male (since boys generally show more interest in animals). In this way, the video producer effectively bridges the psychological gap with young netizens, winning their approval and arousing their passionate feedback in comments and bullet screens. Three highly liked comments, "The new generation brings a fresh style to Animal World," "Post-2000s are entering the workforce," and "The commentator must be a current college student," vividly illustrate the successful persona construction and achievement of video producer's communicative goals in this online context.

3.2 Micro-analysis of the new commentary style

In this part, two representative samples picked from the case illustrate how the video producer creatively utilizes certain constructional features to temporarily construct some unconventional personae based on their indexical fields, which jointly contributes to constructing the video producer as a trendsetter in social media.

(1) One should get more rest during the day, considering that there's still sleep at night. (Hai Xiaopeng, 2024, 0:30-0:33)"

(2) "A kind-hearted leopard is named as 'Shan Bao', while a hungry leopard as 'E Bao.' (Hai Xiaopeng, 2024, 0:51-0:52)"

In the first case, the Chinese construction "...should..., after all..." typically presupposes a cause-and-effect inter-sentential logic and is commonly associated with an "expert" persona, as experts or authorities often use such suggestive and authoritative expressions. However, the video producer subverts this presupposed logic. By doing so, while playfully teasing the phenomenon of some college students' academic passivity, the producer constructed a "pseudo-expert" persona for himself. This approach effectively bridges the psychological gap with young audiences, winning their recognition. Real-time bullet screen responses from college students, such as "It feels like being scolded," demonstrate that the youth have successfully recognized and accepted the temporarily constructed "pseudo-expert" persona. Similarly, in the second example, the commentator constructs a "pseudo-critic" or "pseudo-elder" persona by creatively adapting a Chinese proverb. Conventionally, this proverb is used to evaluate human misbehavior and is typically uttered by critics or elders. In the commentary video, however, the proverb is modified and applied to describe an animal in a hungry state. Such innovations not only help the video producer construct a temporary persona but also reinforce his overarching "trendsetter" persona, piquing the curiosity of young viewers and increasing their engagement with the content.

4 Conclusion

In the era of the prevalence of short videos, traditional TV programs have gradually been discarded by the younger generation due to their fast-paced lifestyles and preference for novelty. Nevertheless, these programs' educational and popularization values remain crucial in counterbalancing the dominance of entertainment in online content, guiding young people towards more knowledge-oriented consumption. The stylistic features of the analyzed commentary video provide a model for traditional TV program innovation. Official accounts of traditional TV programs can construct more approachable and trendy personae through stylistic practices, thereby narrowing the psychological gap with young audiences. This is preferable to strictly adhering to an official broadcasting tone and standard language norms considering that their frequent cooccurrence has been associated with "authority" and "expert" personae. Its rigid use will potentially bore or alienate young viewers, create the psychological distance and impede ideological dissemination in such a relaxed and democratic online environment. Similarly, local media accounts can also utilize stylistic practices to create hospitable personae, attracting more tourists and promoting local economic growth.

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