

Attribution Shields in English Political Interviews

From Perspectives of Projection Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis

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Abstract—In political interviews, as a mitigating device used to lessen the impact of an utterance, hedging is employed to mitigate speakers' responsibility in order to realize their communicative goal or get the better hand in interviews. The present study is intended to investigate whether attribution shields in English political interviews are ideology-driven by serving the different purposes of the two parties in the discourse. We find that the attribution shields were not frequently used by both sides of interviews in the corpus in comparison with the total number of hedges. We also find that the "indirect projection attribution shields" are the most frequently used by interviewers and interviewees, whereas the "free projection attribution shields" are less frequently used. Based on the above findings we argue that despite the relatively low frequency of occurrence of attribution shields in political interview discourse, the interviewers use Attribution shields more frequently than the interviewees, which proves and implies that the interviewers are situated in a lower position and less authoritative than interviewees owing to the functions of attribution shields, using a third person's voice to influence or orient the other speakers and audiences' ideologies, build power relationships in the situated discourse and expose a speaker's underlying ideologies in the spoken discourse. The present study may have both practical and theoretical significances.

Keywords—*projection theory; attribution shields; power relationship; ideology*

I. INTRODUCTION

The output of mass media as important linguistic institutions constitutes a large proportion of the language that people hear and read every day. Media language always attracts the attention of linguists, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. Bell (1995), explaining why media discourse has been so interesting to linguists, says that "the media is important social institutions [1]. They are crucial presenters of culture, politics, and social life, shaping as well as reflecting how these are formed and expressed. Media discourse is important both for what it reveals about a society and for what it contributes to the character of society."

As an innate characteristic of natural languages, vagueness appears to be instantiated in nearly all lexical categories. Many researches on vague language, particularly vague expressions, have been carried out from the perspectives of the origin of vagueness, the relationship

between vagueness and accuracy, fuzzy set theory, etc. However, the relevant critical research fails to notice the possible ideological manipulation of vague language. For example, in news interviews, some politicians prefer to use the first personal pronoun such as "we" or "us" (Huang Yi & Jiang Yue, 2007) [2]. But the intention of using "we" and "us" is open to a variety of interpretations. "We" or "us" can vaguely refer to the speaker herself or himself, or the members of her or his own group, and also refer to "you", namely "the audience", or can be used to refer to hidden audience, and even refer to "them" (Van Dijk, 1998) [3]. Therefore, can we assume that using of the vague references like the above is an unconscious and random behavior? Additionally, in many interviews, large amount of vague language like hedges is used widely by the western politicians.

The present study is significant in both practical and theoretical aspects and our research endeavor to explore some vague expressions from projection theory and critical discourse analysis perspective.

II. METHODOLOGY

The definition of hedges given by Prince (1982), Halliday (1985), Hyland (1998) and Channell (2000) are the basic reference for the identification [4-7]. Hedges can be classified into two categorizations (Prince, 1982). One is named "approximator", a semantic categorization and the other is "shield" which belongs to pragmatic category. The present study utilized the classification of Prince et al. as the most important reference, and identified and marked the following five types of vague expressions in the corpus.

From projection theory perspective, the present study takes the attribution shields as one of the ways for introducing other "voices" into interview discourse and the process is frequently accomplished through mental or verbal reporting verbs which project them. A full projective analysis complemented by an investigation of different reporting modes was conducted to analyze the interviews and show how the various approaches of attribution shields function. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that views language as a form of social practice and focuses on the ways social and political domain are visible in text and talk (Fairclough, 1995) [8]. To summarize, in order to explore of the ideological nature hidden in political

interviews, we examined discursive practice, social practice (particularly production and distribution) and text, and acknowledged the interplay of these three levels analysis.

According to the notion that attribution shields “project” the resources of external voices (Halliday, 1994; Martin, 2000) [9,10], the projected attribution shields can be divided into three subcategories as direct projection, indirect projection and free projection. In "Table I", a detailed classification of the Attribution Shields—Projection Category is presented.

TABLE I. ATTRIBUTION SHIELDS-PROJECTION CATEGORY

Projection Mode	Projection Type
Paratactic	Direct Projection
Hypotactic	Indirect Projection
Embedded	Free Projection

TABLE II. A COMPARISON OF ATTRIBUTION SHIELDS AND HEDGES

	FOX	BBC	NPR	CNN	PBS	Total
Attribution Shield	120	119	120	196	19	
	12	8.5	9.23	16.33	19	13.012
Hedges	457	522	504	633	44	
	45.7	37	38.77	52.75	44	43.644
Percentage	26.26%	22.80%	23.81%	30.96%	43.18%	29.40%

^a Note: In “Attribution Shield” and “Hedges” square patterns, there are two lines of number. The number on the first line refers to the total occurrence of attribution shield or hedges (rounders, adaptors, plausibility shields, attribution shields and modality). The number on the second line represents the average occurrence of attribution shields or hedges. In “Percentage” square pattern, the percentages refer to the average percentage of attribution shields by comparison with the frequency of all the hedges. The numbers on “Total” column represents the average frequency of attribution shields and hedges; the last number on “Total” column refers to the average percentage of attribution shields with reference to the frequency of all the hedges in the corpus.

The results of the percentage of attribution shields among five hedges are reported as follows. Estimates of attribution shields and hedges are displayed separately in "Table II" and "Fig. 1".

As can be seen in "Table II", frequencies of attribution shields and hedges are categorized according to the five media corporations. Measures of the total number of attribution shields extend from 19 to 196. The numbers of attribution shields in PBS interview transcripts is the least whereas CNN the largest. The average estimates of the attribution shields range from 8.5 to 19.

Measures of total number of hedges span from 44 to 633. The numbers of hedges in PBS interview transcripts is the least whereas CNN the largest. The range is large in "Table II" as the total number of attribution shields, suggesting that the selected corpus of PBS is limited to certain degree. Measures of the average frequencies of attribution shields, averages extend from 8.5 to 19. Average number in PBS is the largest whereas BBC the least. Compared with the hedges, the average percentages of attribution shields range from 43.18% to 22.80%.

Focusing on the “Total” column, the average frequency of attribution shields in the corpus is 13.012, which occupy 29.40% with the reference to the four categories of hedges. It can thus be concluded that although the frequency of occurrence of attribution shields is not as high as that of other hedges attribution shields still have a place in the corpus. It can also be inferred from the results that in the political interviews exists the phenomenon of expressing attitudes that is expressing one’s attitudes by means of a third person.

The present study is a tentative endeavor to employ projection theory to explain the attribution shields in interviews. The speakers’ use of a specific set of words associated with each of these attribution shields will also be investigated to evaluate its particular function in context.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A. Frequencies of Attribution Shields in Comparison with Hedges in the Corpus

It is a general view of the statistic frequency of attribution shields in comparison with the total number of the five categories of hedges mentioned in the previous chapter.

"Fig. 1" gives us a more direct view of the proportion of attribution shields compared with the hedges in the corpus.

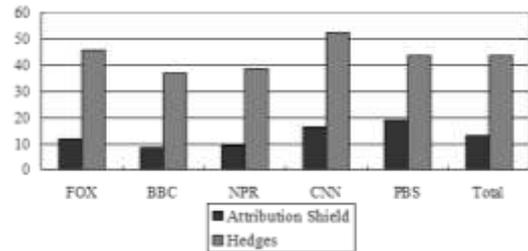


Fig. 1. A comparison of attribution shields and hedges.

B. Quantitative and Qualitative Study of Attribution Shields

The distribution and frequency of attribution shields employed by both interviewers and interviewees in the corpus are counted using the procedures described in Chapter Three. The statistic results are categorized according to five media corporations. The main findings are illustrated in "Table III" and "Fig. 2".

After the comparison between attribution shields and the five categories hedges, the distribution and frequency of attribution shields used by interviewers and interviewees in the whole corpus were calculated. The results are shown in "Table III".

TABLE III. DISTRIBUTION AND FREQUENCY OF ATTRIBUTION SHIELDS IN INTERVIEWERS' AND INTERVIEWEES' SPEECHES

Hedges	(FOX news)		BBC		NPR	
	Interviewer	Interviewee	Interviewer	Interviewee	Interviewer	Interviewee
Attribution Shield	65 <i>6.49</i>	39 <i>1.32</i>	65 <i>7.31</i>	53 <i>1.64</i>	59 <i>7.503</i>	61 <i>3.048</i>
Total Speech	10015	29503	8897	32346	7864	20012
Hedges	CNN		PBS		Total	
	Interviewer	Interviewee	Interviewer	Interviewee	Interviewer	Interviewee
Attribution Shield	76 <i>5.574</i>	120 <i>2.756</i>	5 <i>5.92</i>	14 <i>4.38</i>	270 6.5594	287 2.6288
Total Speech	13633	43544	845	3196	41254	128601

a. Note 1: In "Attribution Shield" square pattern, there are two lines of number. The number on the first line refers to the total occurrence of attribution shield or hedges (rounders, adaptors, plausibility shields, attribution shields and modality). The number on the second line represents the occurrence of attribution shields with reference to the speaker's whole speech. And the unit in measurement is %. In "Total" column, two numbers in bold letter are the ones we will focus on most, which represent the average frequency of attribution shields in the interviewers and interviewees' speeches respectively. Note 2: In the "PBS" column, we notice that the total numbers of attribution shields used by interviewers and interviewees are much less than the others. The reason is the limitation of choosing interview transcripts from PBS. Meanwhile, it may also reveal one limitation of the present study.

As can be seen in "Table III", the total numbers of the frequency of attribution shields used by interviewers extend from 5 to 76. Interviewers of PBS used the fewer attribution shields whereas CNN the largest. The total numbers of the frequency of attribution shields used by interviewees range from 14 to 120. Totally, the number of the frequency of attribution shields used by interviewers is 270 whereas the number of interviewees is 287. The total number of attribution shields is more frequent in the speeches of interviewers than interviewees. But this difference is only based on raw statistics; we should consider all the scripts discourse of interviewers and interviewees respectively. We can see in the second lines of attribution shields (square pattern) that compared with total speeches, interviewers are more frequently use attribution shields than interviewees (the frequency of attribution shields used by interviewers is 6.5594, whereas the interviewees is 2.6288). The numbers indicate that the attribution shields used by interviewers are 3 times more than that used by interviewees (6.5594 per thousand words vs. 2.6288 per thousand words).

A quick look at the occurrence frequency of attribution shields by interviewers and interviewees can be provided as follow:

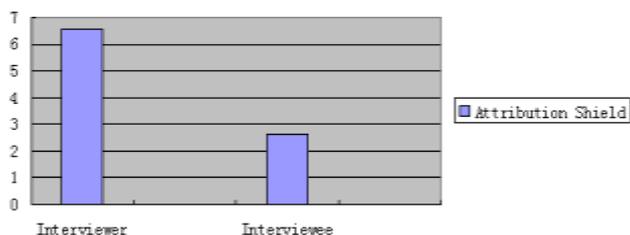


Fig.2. A comparison of the frequencies of attribution shields in interviewers and interviewees' speeches.

To illustrate the statistic difference of using attribution shields by interviewers and interviewees, the estimates are

represented graphically in the form of column diagram in "Fig. 2". In the diagram, we can see clearly that interviewers tended to employ much more attribution shields in the political interviews than interviewees did. The reason can be deduced through the three dimension perspective of CDA. As a "host" in the conversation, interviewer is also a questioner who tries to lead the conversation. An interviewer conducts the discursive practice by producing questions and distributing his own ideals to maintain the interaction. And since political conversations are a kind of ideological process, in this situated context, an interviewer is in relatively low social status and has relatively less authority. Thus he tends to adopt a third person's statement to make his own questions or speeches more pervasive and reasonable. The unintentional use of attribution shields proves that the interviewer conducts both discursive practice and social practice in the conversations. In doing so, the interviewer constructs his social domination and social status in the interviews.

To sum up, in order to show ones attitude and ideology in political interviews, the use of attribution shields is a necessary strategy for the interviewers. Discursive practice, social practice (particularly production and distribution) and text are interplaying in the political interviews.

The frequency of attribution shields per thousand words in interviewers and interviewees are different, but are they really different or significantly different? By using SPSS to compare the distribution and frequency of attribution shields used by the interviewers and interviewees, the result of T-test of difference of vague nouns can be illustrated in "Table IV" and "Table V".

TABLE IV. GROUP STATISTICS

	speaker	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
AS	interviewer	50	6.65704	2.914651	.412194
	interviewee	50	2.37215	1.521901	.215229

TABLE V. INDEPENDENT SAMPLES TEST OF DISTRIBUTION OF ATTRIBUTION SHIELDS IN INTERVIEWERS AND INTERVIEWEES' SPEECHES

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
AS	Equal variances assumed	14.705	0	9.215	98	0	4.28489	0.465003	3.362107	5.207673
	Equal variances not assumed			9.215	73.871	0	4.28489	0.465003	3.358325	5.211455

^a. Note: AS= Attribution Shields

In "Table IV", N is 50, indicating that there are 50 figures analyzed in the T-test, that is, the attribution shields used by interviewers and interviewees respectively in 50 interview transcripts. In Table 5, df is 98. According to the distribution table of t, if df=98, when $t > 1.290$, the difference is significant; when $t < 1.290$, the difference is insignificant. In Table 4-4, $t = 9.215$. From Table 5, we can find that the value for $|t|$, 9.215 is over 1.290, and the sig. = 0.00. Therefore, the difference in the proportions of attribution shields used by interviewers and interviewees is significant.

There is a significant difference and it can be explained and analyzed from three dimensional conception of CDA perspective.

First, let's take account of the social condition for the production and interpretation of the texts. In political interviews, interviewers face some high social statute politicians. No matter how they ask the interviewees, the interviewers' statements should sound authoritative and representative. While the interviewees, in order to put them into an appropriate position and make their statements received by a large group of audience, they use attribution shields which may make their statement more persuasive. In the interview text, both interviewers and interviewees tend to avoid absoluteness and arbitrariness by employing attribution shields as the latter sound impersonal and thus may ease their responsibility.

In political interview context, interviewers produce their attitude by quoting a third person's attitude as a reference or proof in order to convey their attitude to the interviewees and further to the audience. In CDA, this necessary procedure is called as "discursive practice", which is highly associated with "social practice" (Graham, 2005) [11]. The political conversations are the typical social practice which makes the text become ideological in the political conversation settings. The relationship between text and social practice is indirect and mediated. The value of textual features of text only becomes real, socially operative, when they are embedded in social interaction. What's more, because the common-sense assumption of discourse is related to ideologies which accord with particular power relations, the relation between text and social practice is mediated in the social context (Xiao Xianming, 2005). Due to the interaction between the three dimensional conception (social practice, discursive practice and text), interviewers use the attribution shields to attract the audiences' attention to their statement and indicate the authority of their views or statements, interviewers exposure

their ideologies and raise their power position unobtrusively in the text.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on SFG's projection theory, our research find that attribution shields take up 29.40% of all the hedges including direct projection attribution shields (11.53%), indirect projection attribution shields (28.26%) and free projection attribution shields (8.16%) in the corpus. And the frequency of occurrence of attribution shields is relatively low compared with other hedges though attribution shields still take a place in the corpus. The total occurrence frequency of attribution shields used by interviewers is 6.56 per thousand words, whereas the figure for interviewees is 2.63 per thousand words and with significant difference (sig. = 0 < 0.05). Despite the relatively low frequency of occurrence of attribution shields in political interview discourse, both the interviewers and interviewees use the attribution shields and the interviewers use attribution shields more frequently than the interviewee. This research may shed some light on the exploration of other strategy-related linguistic phenomena from a social, cultural, and pragmatic perspective. The present study may be helpful for the audiences and intends to advise the audiences to pay much attention to the attribution shields in Western political interviews for some political figures employ vague expressions just to shun responsibility and some of their explanations are just whitewash.

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