

Constructing Online Teaching Personae: Variation of Discourse Particles among Taiwanese Educational YouTubers

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A popular genre among Taiwanese YouTubers is educational videos. To stand out in the competitive industry, educational YouTubers are expected to be both entertaining and professional. In this paper, I explore the relationship between gender and professional identity evidenced by variation in their use of Discourse Particles (DPs). DPs (e.g. *ne*, *ou*, *a*) in Mandarin are discourse items indicating the speakers' affective attitude and emotion colouring (Han, 2019; Simpson, 2014; Tseng, 2006). DPs are shown to index certain gendered or professional identities. For instance, Chuang (2005) shows that Taiwanese women use certain DPs to infantilise themselves to represent their cuteness. Starr (2011) also suggested that the use of DPs indicates casualness while their absence index the professional and distant characteristics. The use of DPs, as a feature of vernacular speech, may thus index 'casualness' and so increase intimacy with the audience and function as a strategy which YouTubers use to build a following on the platform.

I divide my data into four groups: female science-teaching, male science-teaching, female English-teaching, and male English-teaching. The two most popular Taiwanese YouTubers within each group are selected. Two hours of video clips in total (i.e. ten minutes for each speaker) where they demonstrate the relevant knowledge backgrounds to the audience form the corpus. After collecting all the DPs from the corpus, I examined the types of DPs by analysing their positions in utterances, pitch contour, contexts, and minimal pairs.

The results show that English-teaching YouTubers have greater variation in their DP use, featuring more types, including utterance-medial particles (e.g. *ne*, *a*) and utterance-initial and -final modal particles (e.g. *en*, *wa*, *ma*, *ba*) and tokens of DPs to create a casual teaching style whereas science-teaching YouTubers apply fewer types (mostly utterance-final modal particles, such as *ou* and *la*) and tokens of DPs. This finding suggests the fundamental difference of teaching styles between English and science education, with YouTubers emphasizing aspects of closeness and distance respectively via their variation in DP use.

While gender was not a major variable across fields, female and male speakers used different strategies to express their professional identities when they teach different subjects. Female English-teaching YouTubers use more types and tokens of DPs than male ones, while female science-teaching YouTubers use fewer types and tokens of DPs, particularly the utterance-medial particles (e.g. *ne*), than their male counterparts.

The results suggest that DPs are stylistic variables used by Taiwanese educational YouTubers to manage the tension between entertainer and professional personae. As science education is still a male-dominant field in Taiwan, female YouTubers in this genre are inclined to index a more professional speech style than male ones. In contrast, while the English-teaching genre shows a relatively casual style of teaching compared to the science-teaching field, female speakers in this genre tend to create intimacy between themselves and the audience with various types of DPs whereas men have individual strategies to negotiate their relationship with the audience.

References

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