

A Pragmatic Study of Self-praise in Stand-up Comedies

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Abstract: Scholars have ignored self-praise, a speech act of boasting oneself and a way of positive self-presentation and self-evaluation, for many years due to its violation of the modesty maxim and self-denigration maxim. While as an emerging “Versailles-style” discourse pattern, self-praise used by communicators to positively evaluate their praiseworthiness are becoming to be paid attention to researchers. Drawing on the Dramaturgical Theory, this study adopted a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods with the help of NVivo (version 12) to code and classify 155 collected self-praise corpus in Rock &Roast 5, analyzing pragmatic strategies, topic distribution and effects of self-praise used by stand-up comedians. In this study, self-praise is categorized into three types: explicit self-praise without modification, modified explicit self-praise containing six sub-strategies, and implicit self-praise with four sub-strategies. Meanwhile, the topics of self-praise mostly focused on individuals themselves and personal experiences. Comedians frequently used self-praise speech acts to express their praiseworthiness and construct their positive personal identity, so as to make a humorous program effectiveness and leave a deep impression on the audience.

Keywords: The Dramaturgical Theory, Self-praise, Speech act, Rock &Roast 5.

1. Introduction

As “Versailles literature” becoming a popular topic on the Internet in recent years, the “Versailles” speech, which is also called the speech act of self-praise, appears frequently in online social media. According to Austin’s (1978) “Saying is doing.” in Speech Act Theory, the use of self-praise is essentially a compliment about oneself, which is helpful for communicators to express their praiseworthiness. Especially in stand-up comedies, stand-up comedians performing in front of the stage use various language symbols to show their humor, construct their positive identities, and meet audiences’ expectations as far as possible. Numerous language signs and different speech acts are utilized by speakers to realize social purposes such as constructing positive identities and making a deep impression on listeners, which is actually a way of impression management.

With Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory, this paper aims to explore the pragmatic strategies of self-praise and effects for comedians’ personal identities in Rock &Roast 5.

2. Literature Review

Traditional linguistics considers self-praise as an impolite act threatening the face of listeners, which goes against Leech’s modesty maxim (1983) and Gu’s self-denigration maxim (1990), leading to little attention to self-praise initially. However, with the rise of “Versailles literature”, linguists began to investigate self-praise and its pragmatic strategies, pragmatic meaning and functions, believing that self-praise is a kind of speech act of making a positive self-evaluation by speakers (Guo & Ren, 2020).

The previous research on self-praise has focused on face-to-face communications (Maiz-Arevalo, C. 2021; Speer, S. A., 2012) as well as social media networks. For example, Dayter (2016) studied self-praise discourses from the ballet student community and summarized four pragmatic strategies. Tobback (2019) investigated self-praise strategies used by French and American job seekers to demonstrate their professional skills on LinkedIn. Under the guidance of Tracy

and Robles’ identity construction theory, Huang explored self-praise strategies of Taobao anchors in live streaming communications and their constructed identities. Ren &Guo (2022) argued self-praise phenomena of Chinese youth in WeChat circle of friends. Duan (2022) studied the influence of self-praise mode and content on the adoption of decision makers’ suggestions and the psychological mechanism from the perspective of psychological science.

It is found that although scholars analyzed pragmatic characteristics and the use of self-praise from different research perspectives, studies on functions and effects of self-praise are less, so this paper investigates the self-praise phenomenon in stand-up comedies, including its pragmatic strategies and effects on constructing personal identities.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Dramaturgical Theory

The theoretical framework of this paper is Goffman’s Dramaturgical Theory (1959) who thinks that life is a performance and society is a stage. The core part of the Dramaturgical Theory is “impression management.”, holding that everyone is the actor of his own life who manages his actions deliberately in order to create a positive impression that he hopes for. Unlike real-life social communication, stand-up comedies are entertainment programs with performance characteristics in which comedians consciously perform themselves through various language symbols to construct their positive identities and meet the expectations of audiences on the stage. They usually use various strategies of self-praise to express their praiseworthiness.

3.2. Research Data

This paper decides to focus on self-praise corpus collected from Rock &Roast 5, which is one of the most popular stand-up comedies in China. 155 data consisting of self-praise are found in this comedy. In the process of data coding, a mixture of pragmatic strategies was embodied in many texts. In these cases, each independent strategy was calculated a separate

coding. Consequently, 155 self-praise texts yielded a total of 171 self-praise strategies. Furthermore, any grammatical errors or word errors in the corpus are not modified. All comedians' names have been deleted to protect their privacy.

3.3. Research Methods

From the dramaturgical theory, this study adopts a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis methods with the help of NVivo (version 12) to code and classify the 155 collected self-praise corpus in Rock &Roast 5, analyzing pragmatic strategies and topic distribution used by stand-up comedians in self-praise, and further exploring effects of self-praise in the construction of personal identity of stand-up comedians.

3.4. Research Questions

This paper aims to explore the following questions:

- 1) What are pragmatic strategies employed by comedians in stand-up comedies?
- 2) What are features of frequencies of self-praise strategies and topical distribution?
- 3) What effects have comedians realized with self-praise?

4. Research Findings

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of pragmatic strategies of self-praise and effects on constructing comedians' personal identities are shown in this section.

Through the iterative process of corpus collection, categorization, and coding, three types of self-praise are identified: explicit self-praise without modification, modified explicit self-praise, and implicit self-praise, which are in line with Guo and Ren's (2020) classification in their study of self-praise. Based on the analysis of the available data, some new sub-strategies under these macro-categories were also identified. For example, classified self-praise under explicit self-praise with modification and self-praise as teasing under implicit self-praise. Figure 1 and Figure 2 report the major types of pragmatic strategies and their sub-strategies employed in self-praise on Rock &Roast 5.

As indicated in Figure 1 &2, almost half of implicit self-praise strategies are employed (accounts for 47.95%). While in terms of explicit self-praise, interestingly, comedians prefer to directly compliment themselves (accounts for 32.16%) rather than in more indirect ways (accounts for 19.88%). Each self-praise strategy is demonstrated in more detail in the following sections.

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage(%)
Explicit self-praise without modification	55	32.16
Modified explicit self-praise	34	19.88
Praise from a third party	13	7.6
Analogical self-praise	7	4.09
Downgraded self-praise	6	3.51
Change of praise focus	5	2.92
Self-praise as intra-personal comparison	2	1.17
Self-praise with disclaimer	1	0.58
Implicit self-praise	82	47.95
Self-praise as a narration	46	26.9
Self-praise as teasing	26	15.2
Self-praise as a question	5	2.92
Self phrase as an interaction	5	2.92
Total	171	100

Figure 1. Frequency and percentage of self-praise strategies

Name	Sources	References
Explicit self-praise without modification	1	55
Implicit self-praise	1	82
Self-praise as a narration	1	46
Self-praise as a question	1	5
Self-praise as an interaction	1	5
Self-praise as teasing	1	26
Modified explicit self-praise	1	34
Analogical self-praise	1	7
Change of praise focus	1	5
Downgraded self-praise	1	6
Praise from a third party	1	13
Self-praise as intra-personal comparison	1	2
Self-praise with disclaimer	1	1

Figure 2. Node of self-praise strategies in NVivo

4.1. Explicit Self-praise without Modification

Explicit self-praise without modification means direct expression of one's positive statement, which is also called bragging, including some sub-strategies to express one's strengths of appearance, competence, and personalities, such as using superlatives, comparing with others, expressing less surprise, and emphasizing less hard-working (Miller, 1992). In this study, there are many examples of using positive words and comparing to others. For example:

(1) *A few days ago, I acted in Moon You, so I'm now the man with \$2.9 billion box office.*

(2) *Every year, there is always a graduate from Peking University in this program. While I am not quite the same as these two girls, I am our province's top scorer in the college entrance examination.*

(3) *As the youngest building leader in our community, my biggest advantage is that I am very fashionable.*

In example 1, the comedian praises himself as “the man with \$2.9 billion box office” meanwhile affirms his ability and popularity. Example 2 is a speech act of self-praise by comparing others, in which the actress directly praises her education background and learning ability, stating that she not only graduated from Peking University but also is the top scorer in the provincial college entrance examination. In example 3, the actress uses the positive adjective “fashionable” and the superlative “the youngest” to express her advantages of being young and fashionable (Matley, 2018).

In addition, the exaggerated self-praise appeared in this study. Comedians use exaggerated rhetorical devices to magnify their strengths and increase their humorous program effect, as in example 4.

(4) *I am the king of the trade, the legend of A share. Private investors worship me, institutions against me, Assurance Committee investigate me, but they get nothing on me. I will take a huge amount of assets to retreat to the countryside, left to this cruel secondary market eight characters: Buffett is not so special.*

The actor exaggeratedly praises his ability and luck in the stock market when he talked about his first success in speculating, with “king”, “legend”, “a huge amount of assets”, and “worship”, “against”, “investigate” reflecting the confidence of him which shows that he is a genius of speculation. However, due to his subsequent debacle of losing much money, this exaggerated boast does not bring audiences disgust but triggers them bursting into laughter by forming a strong contrast.

In this study, although explicit self-praise without modification is such an “interactionally risky activity” (Dayter, 2014), it is used frequently by many stand-up comedians to express their praiseworthiness. Different from avoiding direct boast in face-to-face communication, stand-up comedians do not have to be restricted by the traditional rule of modesty, which is also in line with the characteristics of relaxing and humorous style in comedies.

4.2. Modified Explicit Self-praise

To mitigate the face-threatening effects of self-praise and to take care of the hearer's positive face, comedians may use some modified ways when they praise themselves. All together six sub-strategies are found in the current data: praise from a third party, classified self-praise, downgraded self-

praise, change of praise focus, self-praise as intra-personal comparison, and self-praise with disclaimer.

4.2.1. Praise from a third party

The modification ‘praise from a third party’ is to praise oneself by reporting others' evaluation more objectively, which is a common strategy of self-praise both in online communication and face-to-face communication (Wu, 2012; Dayter, 2016; Maíz-Arévalo, 2021). At the same time, presenting advantages affirmed by others also reduces the possibility of exaggeration, making it easier for audiences to accept.

(5) *I learned electric welding from primary school, because my father encouraged me to study hard through this matter. While my talent of electric welding is so strong that I could weld shovels when I was ten. The villagers were shocked and spread that our village has a welding genius.*

In example 5, the actor praises his ability in a more indirect and objective way by quoting “our village has a welding genius”, helping he construct a talent identity more persuasively.

4.2.2. Analogical self-praise

Analogical self-praise refers to an analogical process (Hess, 1966) of putting oneself and others together due to their similar characteristics, which is usually used by comedians to compare their characteristics with some celebrities or things that have similar characteristics. For example:

(6) *As the hair grew longer, my bottom line is getting lower and lower. Lastly, what's that word again? My image in dual ponytail is as cute as Cyndi Wang.*

(7) *Now we are good friends, everyone began to ship my ex-husband. Why? Because our couple is like sugar-free drink, which is sweet and healthy but won't do any harm to you.*

Example 6 shows the cute appearance of the actor, which likes Chinese sweetheart's cuteness. In Example 7, the comedian compared the netizens' attention on her relationship with her ex-husband to the likeness of sugar-free drink. These two all use classified self-praise to make their strengths more visible to audiences.

4.2.3. Downgraded self-praise

Speakers use some expressions that reduce the level of boasting to downgrade the positive evaluation of themselves, such as “Just” (Dayter, 2016), demonstrating the speaker's attempt to present his humbleness. For example:

(8) *The video posted on the Internet has more than 10 million view counts, in which I said my experience as a house master. And it was forwarded by CCTV and was popular a little bit.*

Example 8 is a typical degraded self-praise. The actress is a video blogger whose videos are popular and received attention of CCTV, with her clever use of adverb “a little bit”, constructing her humble personal identity, which is in line with the modesty maxim of Leech's politeness theory (1983).

4.2.4. Change of praise focus

The strategy described as “change of praise focus” refers to praising other person(s) or thing(s) relevant to the blogger to indicate his/her positive self-image (Guo & Ren, 2020). Comparing direct self-praise, it is clear that this strategy is more indirect and alleviate.

(9) *I pursued my husband firstly when we were not couples. He is very handsome.*

In example 9, this double discourse (Matley, 2018) of

explicitly praising her husband meanwhile indicating her excellence not only complements others but also constructs a positive identity of the speaker.

4.2.5. Self-praise as intra-personal comparison

Unlike the direct explicit boast of comparison with others, self-praise as intra-personal comparison is a way to compare the speaker with himself. The common method is drawing comparisons of oneself between past and present, which is also a way to mitigate the face threat to audiences. For instance:

(10) *I am a hard-working person, but recently, I just want to slack off.*

(11) *Anyway, I really appreciate these media people, because they are the ones who give me chances. But behind the media camera, I am more real and interesting.*

In case 11, as a polio patient, the actor bravely shows his body defects to audiences, contrasting the mass media's stereotype of him and the real one. He expresses his optimistic and humorous personalities inexplicitly.

4.2.6. Self-praise with disclaimer

It is the strategy that the speaker employs a verbal expression, such as "I am not praising myself" or "I am not boasting" to minimize the degree of self-praise and to alleviate the threat of audiences' faces (Guo & Ren, 2020). The following example illustrates this strategy:

(12) *In my second year as a comedy leader, I brought Rock & Roast to Shandong for recording. I hope to make Shandong the largest province of stand-up comedies within three years. As we know the leaders like to brag.*

In example 12, as a leader of Rock & Roast, the actor has expressed his work contribution and goals, adding a claimer "As we know the leaders like to brag", which helps he shed some of the responsibility for self-praising (Dayter, 2014).

4.3. Implicit Self-praise

Contrary to the explicit self-praise, implicit self-praise refers an indirect speech act that the speaker expresses self-praise by performing other speech acts. The locutionary act of the current speech act is not consistent with the illocutionary force (SEARLE, 1969). In this study, four sub-strategies of implicit self-praise are as follows: self-praise as a narration, self-praise as a question, self-praise as teasing, and self-praise as an interaction.

4.3.1. Self-praise as a narration

Self-praise as a narration is a sub-strategy within implicit self-praise in Guo and Ren's (2020), who mentioned that the self-praise behavior is realized by narration. The stand-up comedians seem to just narrate events in his/her life to audiences, but the real purpose of self-praising is embedded in the narration, as illustrated in example 13:

(13) *There is really much wonderful experience in this year, such as a few days ago our university teacher let me go back to share my experience of getting success.*

In this case, the actor ostensibly describes the invitation from his teacher, but there are no difficulties for audiences to understand that the true meaning behind the narration is actually boasting: the speaker has now become a successful talk show actor.

4.3.2. Self-praise as a question

It describes the self-praise is found in the form of question in which the speakers display their commendable merits (Dayter, 2014). In this article, yes-no questions (14), wh-

questions (15) and questions which are answered by oneself (16) are used to seek answers from listeners at the surface, but in fact indirectly leading to actors' praiseworthiness.

(14) *That boy secretly looked at me several times, he seems to talk to me. Seeing his nervous appearance and blushing expression, I wonder if he wants to add my wechat account.*

(15) *My mother said that this major you choosing is not good for employment. While I said: why to consider employment? Peking University is not a technical college.*

(16) *If my performance is interesting, I will ask that How's my performance? Wonderful!*

4.3.3. Self-praise as teasing

Self-praise as teasing refers to the speaker's boasting in a joking way, conveying the speaker's advantages and creating a relaxed and humorous dialogue atmosphere. This self-praise strategy is frequently used on comedies, for instance:

(17) *My daughter really likes to watch Rock & Roast and talk to me that this is stand-up comedy, someone stands on the stage telling a joke. I thought my daughter was a joke, I've been talking for a year.*

(18) *My biggest worry now is that I can't write good jokes. I often get angry in the mirror at home and wondered if writing jokes is as easy as looking beautiful.*

Example 17 is displayed by a middle-aged woman with sharing audiences her conversation with her daughter, poking fun of her daughter who doesn't know she talk comedies for a year. This humorous way not only expresses her ability of being a good stand-up comedian, but embodies the mother and daughter's humorous atmosphere, making audiences laugh. In example 18, the comedian jokes that she could not write a good text, saying that "if writing jokes is as easy as looking beautiful", praising her appearance and teasing her trouble of writing a good joke.

4.3.4. Self-praise as an interaction

Self-praise as an interaction is the obvious discourse interaction between the speaker and the listener, in which the speakers' response of others' praises is also considered as a way of boasting. This kind of boast often appears in variety shows. In example 19 and 20 actors respond to the audiences' praise by accepting this praise positively, indirectly reflecting their praiseworthiness.

(19) *Audiences: You are so beautiful!*

The actress: Ok, ok, fine. (Waving & smiling)

(20) *Audiences: Guang Ge! Guang Ge!*

The actor: Thank you, thank you.

Audiences: So handsome!

The actor: I know, I know I am handsome. (Smiling)

4.4. Topic Distribution

As far as this study is concerned, the topics of self-praise mostly focus on individuals themselves, among which the topics of conspicuous abilities, appearance, personality, social status and professional characteristics account for many, while family background, educational background and economic strength, which may involve the private life of comedians are less. Secondly, stand-up comedians praises very frequently as they tell their personal experiences. By telling their own personal experiences, comedians could present their strengths like storytelling, narrowing the psychological distance between them and audiences. In terms of relationships, praising families is a way for the speaker to change the praise center, indirectly indicating their strengths through the praise of their loved ones, while it is found only

three times. There is no boast about friends in the current data.

Fig. 3 shows the frequency of self-praise themes.

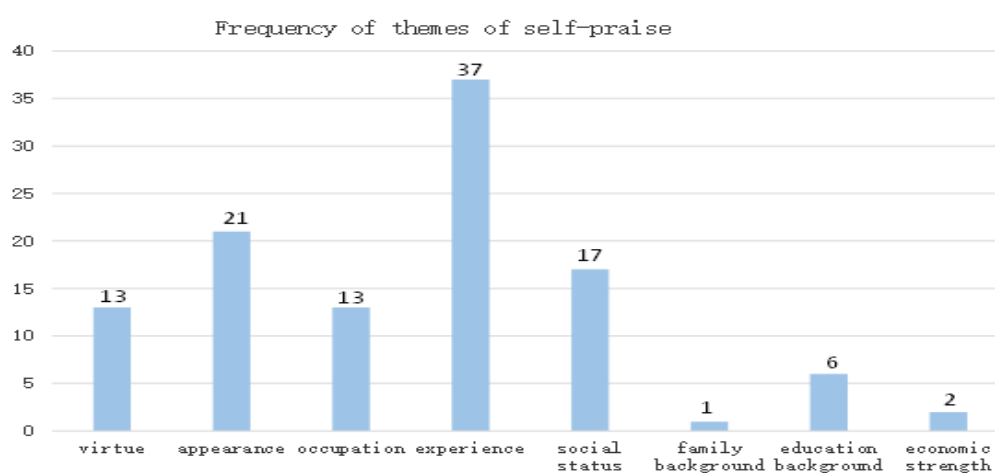


Figure 3. Frequency of self-praise themes

4.5. Effects of self-praise

In stand-up comedies, comedians frequently use self-praise to express their praiseworthiness and construct their positive personal identity, so as to leave a deep impression on audiences. Considering the humorous effect of variety, comedians usually choose language with humor when boasting, using strategies such as exaggerated self-praising and self-praising as teasing, in order to constructing a humorous personal identity. At the same time, for the avoidance of the audiences' face threatening, these actors also use some modified self-praise and implicit self-praise strategies to build a modest personal identity, such as praising from a third-party. And such boasts are more easily accepted by audiences.

5. Conclusion

As a way of self-presentation aimed to build a positive self-image, the speech act of self-praise is very important for speakers, which is in line with Goffman's opinion: when interacting with others, people often pay much attention to their social image and the presentation of self, i.e. their face (Goffman, 1959). Thus, self-praise is closely related to the concepts of face and could be regarded as a face-enhancing act for the speaker due to its aim of receiving recognition and praise from the hearer. After the careful investigation of current data, many self-praise strategies are found in this paper, which can be categorized into three major groups: explicit self-praise without modification, modified explicit self-praise, and implicit self-praise. The use of self-praise can help the communicators construct a positive self-image and strengthen the positive face of the communicators. While influenced by many cultural factors, such as being modest and protecting listeners' face, speakers may choose different self-praise to indirectly praise themselves.

This study has a certain amount of theoretical significance and practical value, theoretically providing a new case of empirical analysis for dramaturgical theory and enriching types of self-praise strategies. In practical terms, this study is a proactive response to the call by pragmatics to focus on social reality by exploring the pragmatic effects of comedians' self-praise, expecting to provide countermeasures of the use of self-praises for relevant we-media workers and promote the

construction of discourse identity and the harmony of interpersonal relationship. However, the corpus of this study is inevitably scripted, whether the research results being applicable to daily conversations remains to be deeply analyzed.

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