RESEARCH ARTICLE

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A Pragmatic Study on the Construction of Salespersons' Identity in Sales Suggestive Speech Acts
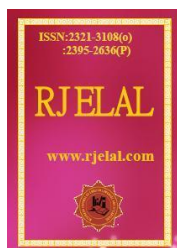
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Abstract

This paper takes the speech act of suggestions in sales processes as the research object and explores the types and strategies of identity construction from the perspective of pragmatic identity theory. It also examines the pragmatic orientation of "rapport" reflected in these strategies. The study finds that salespersons construct six different identities, including knowledgeable experts, amicable experts, peer identities, seller identities, weaker identities, and customers, by weakening or strengthening the degree of instruction through direct statements, proverbs, address terms, and modal particles. These strategies aim to achieve the goal of selling products.

Keywords: Sales suggestion; pragmatic identity; identity construction; pragmatic orientation.

1. Introduction

Suggestion is one of the most common speech acts in our daily life. As a type of directives, the speaker uses suggestion to guide the hearer to take action while providing the hearer with a certain degree of choice. And sales, is a process of guiding customers to facilitate transactions through suggestions, which is guided by customer needs, analyzing needs, judging needs, solving needs, and meeting needs. In a broad sense, sales is a type of speech act of suggestion, in which the information sender uses certain methods and techniques, such as persuasion, inducement, and assistance, to make the information receiver accept the sender's suggestion process, that is to tell the other party what is best for them (Searle, 1969:67). Research on sales behavior has mostly focused on business management strategies (Wang Rui, 2023), teaching exploration in sales classrooms (Xu Chunlei, 2022), and the social impact of sales (Zhou Qiyi, 2022), without conducting in-depth pragmatic analysis of suggestive speech acts.

Thus, this study aims to fill the gap by examining the pragmatic identity construction in sales speech act of suggestions and exploring its interpersonal pragmatic rationale and orientation features.

2. Literature Review

Research on sales behavior has primarily focused on sales strategies. For example, Wang Yong (2011) proposed the "DACL" model (Desire-Interest-Confidence-Loyalty) based on customer needs. In terms of the combination of classroom teaching and sales, Zhang Chu (2015) explored many problems in the actual teaching implementation process of sales course under the engineering combined talent training model in Taizhou Vocational and Technical College. Studies on the social impact of sales behavior have emphasized the importance of building good relationships with customers (Guo Weigang 2004). However, pragmatic research on sales as speech act of suggestions remains limited.

Research on speech act of suggestion has been extensive. Searle (1969) proposed the theory of indirect speech acts and the sufficient and necessary conditions for speech acts to compensate for the shortcomings of speech act theory. He classified illocutionary act into five categories: representatives, commissives, directives, declaratives and expressives. Speech acts of suggestion were divided into directives. After Searle, Banerjee and Carrel (1998) redefined speech act of suggestions as a type of speech that the speaker uses to make the hearer do something beneficial to the hearer. Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the face theory, which holds that most speech acts are "face-threatening acts" (FTA), and analyzed speech act of suggestions as a type of face-threatening acts that threatens the positive face of the hearer.

According to the theory of speech acts, discourse has literal meaning and illocutionary force (i.e. the true communicative intention). When the literal meaning of a discourse is the same as its power, there is no need for the speaker to scrutinize it, and the discourse is direct. In other words, direct speech act of suggestion refers to the speaker using the literal meaning of the discourse to express the communicative intention of suggestion. On the contrast, Searle (1979:31) believes that indirect speech acts are acts of speech that indirectly carry out a certain speech act through other speech acts, indicating that the literal meaning and illocutionary force of indirect speech acts are not completely equivalent. In other words, indirect speech act of suggestion is when the speaker implements the speech act of suggestion with another speech act, and the literal meaning and illocutionary force of the discourse are not completely equivalent. The hearer needs to go through certain scrutiny to determine that their intention of suggestion.

In terms of foreign language acquisition and teaching, some scholars have compared and studied the language expression forms and politeness strategies of native English speakers and non-native English speakers when giving suggestion in English (Banerjee & Carerell 1988). Kouper (2010) studied the suggestion patterns and interaction structures among members of online peer communities regarding the implementation strategies of speech act of suggestions, and found that opinion exchange is a common type of social interaction in peer communication, and speech act of suggestions have a unique structure. Subsequent studies have explored speech act of suggestions from various perspectives, including language acquisition, teaching, social and cultural influences, and gender differences. In terms of studying the social and cultural influencing factors of speech acts, different scholars have studied the effects of factors such as gender, social distance, and age on the participants' ability to make suggestive speech acts.

Domestic scholars have also conducted diverse research on speech act of suggestions, focusing on language acquisition, politeness strategies, and cultural factors. In terms of language acquisition and teaching, Hao

Chunxia (2000) compared the implementation patterns of speech act of suggestions between Chinese participants and native English-speaking participants. It is found that native English speakers make suggestions in a humbler tone, while Chinese students tend to use direct sentence patterns guided by the performative verb to make suggestions. Lu Jiawei (2014) discussed politeness strategies in implementing suggestive speech acts from the perspective of Brown and Levinson's face view, and compared the types, frequencies, and social power levels of politeness strategies used in Chinese and English speech act of suggestions on politeness strategies. Wang Fang (2006) analyzed and explained the implementation of the "suggestion" speech act in Chinese based on Chinese language corpus and studied the politeness strategies used by Chinese users. In terms of cultural factors behind speech act of suggestions, Liang Xiaojie (2018) studied speech act of suggestions in Dongxiang dialect from the perspective of socio-pragmatics and compared them with speech act of suggestions in Lanzhou dialect.

Based on previous researches, this article will compare and analyze the identity changes that occur in different categories of speech act of suggestions in sales, and summarize their orientational characteristics.

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

i. What types of speech act of suggestions do salespersons primarily use in telephone sales? What identities do they construct?

ii. What pragmatic strategies and rationales do salespersons use to construct these identities?

iii. What are the main orientation features of the identities constructed by salespersons?

3.2 Data Collection

Based on the above questions, this study collected and transcribed nearly 30 minutes of sales conversations, focusing on the speech act of suggestions in the dialogues.

3.3 Data Analysis

Salespersons construct different identities through speech act of suggestions to achieve their communicative goals. Pragmatic identity theory emphasizes the dynamic construction of social identities in discourse and their connection to the context. This study combines pragmatic identity theory with speech act of suggestions of sales, adopting qualitative research method to analyze the dynamic construction of identities and their orientation features in sales speech act of suggestions, eventually the pragmatic rationale of interpersonal relationship construction will be given.

After transcribing the 30-minute and 36 second voice conversation, it was concluded that the salesperson issued a total of 105 suggestions, including 6 direct speech act of suggestions, 51 conventional indirect speech acts, and 48 non-conventional indirect speech acts. The proportion of the three is shown in the following table 1:

Table 1:Classification Table of Suggestive Speech in Sales Conversations

Category	Number (and example)	Proportion
Direct Suggestive Speech Act	"……我建议还是报英语初阶班比较好，孩子打基础才是最重要的对不对？"	5.71%

Liang Cui & Wenjuan Ma

Indirect Suggestive Speech Act	Conventional Indirect Suggestive Speech Act	"其实这几个套餐差别是有的，就看你想要什么样的配置呢？或者我给你推荐套餐吧。"	48.6%	94.4%
	Non-conventional Indirect Suggestive Speech Act	"美育幼教是孩子成长的一个宝藏……孩子要是把绘画当做爱好了，那就是陶冶身心的艺术，气质保准和别人不一样，要是以后中考高考能用咱孩子的绘画成绩加加分，那更好了……"	45.8%	

As shown in Table 1, indirect speech acts account for 94.4% of sales speech act of suggestions in sales discourse, of which conventional indirect speech act of suggestions account for 48.6% and non-conventional indirect speech act of suggestions account for 45.8%. It can be seen that sales discourse tends to be more tactful and implicit, and its politeness level will change due to the distance between information intention and communication intention. Salespeople's construction of their identity will also change accordingly.

The following text will take sales speech act of suggestions as the main research object to explore their identity construction and orientation characteristics.

4. Analysis and Discussion

Pragmatic identity refers to "the context-specific identities chosen intentionally or unintentionally by language users as well as the other identity of social individuals or groups mentioned by speakers or authors in their discourse, collectively referred to as pragmatic identity" (Chen Xinren, 2013). Sales speech act of suggestions involve the dynamic construction of identities between salespersons and customers with changes of context.

The following sections analyze the types and orientation features of identity construction in sales speech act of suggestions.

4.1 Identity Construction in Direct Speech Act of Suggestions

1) Knowledgeable Expert Identity

Salespersons will add more professional vocabulary when introducing products, detailing the advantages and disadvantages of the product from product, technology, brand, and development history, including product features and application scenarios, showcasing professional knowledge, experience, and special skills in a certain aspect, emphasizing the advantages of the product with more practical cases and customer feedback, winning customer trust, attracting hearers to consume, and common phrases such as "我建议/我劝/我认为". For example:

(1) "A: 对于您的这种忧虑，我们这边以及考虑到了，家长们普通表现出对孩子的单词学习比较焦虑，您不用担心，我们机构这边建议您放松心情，不要把坏情绪带给孩子，词汇积累不仅要有学习方法更要有时间的加成，最好还是培养孩子记单词的习惯和爱好……所以我建议啊，还是报英语初阶班比较好，孩子打基础才是最重要的。"

In example sentence (1), when the salesperson uses explicit performative sentences to achieve the communicative intention of direct suggestion, they use the structure of "speaker (我)+performative verb + hearer (你/您/你们/我们/咱们)+VP", that is, "我们机构这边建议您…". The example not only soothes the parents' emotions, but also demonstrates their understanding of the relevant field and gives suggestions such as "最好还是…" and "我建议…". The speaker deliberately pauses "啊" to

attract the attention of the hearer to the specific content behind it, and also reduces the degree of directive language, reducing the degree of imposition of language on the hearer, making the language more easy-going and colloquial. To a certain extent, it is beneficial for easing the threat to the hearer's face.

2) Amicable Expert Identity

Salespersons construct an amicable expert identity by weakening their own authority and using subjective markers like "我个人意见是" or "我觉得" as hedges to soften the affirmative tone of the utterance and reduce the degree of the directive, so as to increase the politeness of the utterance. For example:

(2) "A: 我们美好童心绘画教育机构的客户人群主要就是中小学生和幼儿，刚刚听您说孩子年龄比较小，也没太接触过绘画，那么我这边的个人推荐是选择一周试听课，先看看咱孩子感兴趣吗？如果感兴趣的话可以继续续费……"

In Example 2, the salesperson formed a complete speech act of suggestion with "我这边的个人推荐" and specific suggestion content --"选择一周试听课", reducing the sense of imposition on the hearer, maintaining their face, making the suggestion easier to accept, and also building a friendly expert identity.

4.2 Identity Construction in Conventional Indirect Speech Act of Suggestions

1) Peer Identity

In addition to professional knowledge, salespeople will understand customers' purchasing purposes, usage and purchasing ability troughing make customers automatically let go of their guard and show their psychological needs. It was found that salespeople also construct the identity of close friends when facing customers. In the process of constructing identity, the salesperson mainly uses the following two language means: intimate address words and modal particles.

(3) "A: 那么如果有需要的话，聊了这么久了，也算是我的一份心意，也正好是五一假期，咱家小

宝宝如果要上绘画课程的话，就当我做姨姨的一点心意，再赠送小宝贝六节数学课程，我这边给您登记上，到时候来上课直接报手机号就可以啦。"

4) A：我一听你就是喜欢锻炼的人，咱们健身房开业酬宾，不仅设备齐全，还有私人教练免费授课两小时，你要是来的话，我再帮你沟通申请一下，给你这边再加四个小时的私教课你看怎么样？

In Example (3), the salesperson uses affectionate and lively directive terms such as "宝宝" and "小伙伴" for informal conversations between friends, and weakens the strength of the directives by using the final particle "啦" to shorten the psychological distance between themselves and consumers, facilitating communication and shaping the identity of friends or peers.

In Example (4), the salesperson subjectively mark "我一听" to indicate their agreement with the other party and the direction of the suggested content. "你看怎么样？" softened the tone of the words, reduced the degree of instruction, and strengthened the peer identity.

2) Seller Identity

The implementation of indirect speech act of suggestions in the form of stating results refers to that the speaker used the hearer's psychological characteristics of seeking benefits and avoiding harm by stating the two different consequences so that everything will go along with the speaker's willing. This form of language makes use of psychological intervention or suggestion role on the hearer to allow the hearer to decide something on their own seemingly, and thus achieving indirect suggestions to the hearer. For example:

(5) "A: 我是专程来告诉您如何赚钱和节省成本的方法的，您先别急，听我慢慢来说，通过刚刚短暂地跟您聊天就知道您一定是位壮志绸缪的人，您看现在人都在在银行存定期，利率却比之前低了很多，而且物价也在一直上涨，人都说开源节

流开源节流，节流不如开源，那怎么开源呢？还是得有规划有信心的人，不然干个几天就跑路那能干好吗？<u>如果是您进行理财或贷款的话，我们给予您一定的短期支持，您能回报我们的肯定是源源不断的。</u>您看我行现在有以下……几种产，它们分别为……"

In Example (5), the salesperson stated that the result of the customer's "如果进行贷款或者理财" is "回报源源不断", and used the hearer's "profit seeking" psychological characteristics to provide suggestion to the hearer --- to take out a loan or manage their finances. They also induced the hearer to take action by stating some product features and advantages, thus constructing the identity of a "seller".

4.3 Identity Construction in Non-conventional Indirect Speech Act of Suggestions

1) Weaker Identity

Salespeople give indirect suggestion to hearers by stating their requests or about to perform a certain behavior. In other words, salespeople hope to help hearers feel a sense of achievement by performing a certain behavior themselves, which will also prompt hearers to perform another corresponding behavior and benefit from it, for example:

(6) "A: 您好，我是英特国际英语某某某，这个时候给您打电话没有打扰您吧？

A: 我这边是<u>有件事想请您帮忙</u>。是这样的，相信您收到过我们市场人员发的 580 元免费体验卡了，因为每天来中心体验的人非常多，为了不耽误您宝贵的时间，现想跟您预约好体验时间。"

B：不好意思啊，最近太忙了可能没空

A：嗯，那您先忙，等您回来再约好吗？祝您工作顺利！

In Example (6),"预约"refers to the behavior that the speaker is about to take. The salesperson transforms suggestions into requests by making "requests", improves the status of the hearer, weakens their own status, which gives the hearer a sense of achievement in

helping others, successfully shaping the image of a disadvantaged identity.

2) Customer Identity

Salespeople use their own feelings or evaluations to implement speech act of suggestions, hoping use their feelings or evaluations to make the hearer make a reasonable response: When the feelings or evaluations are good, the hearer feels affirmed or encouraged, and continues or insists on implementing a certain behavior; When the feelings or evaluations are not good, the hearer will quickly eliminate the hearer's negative feelings or evaluations. To achieve this goal (eliminating the negative feelings or evaluations), it is necessary to carry out a certain behavior, thereby indirectly suggesting to the hearer by stating common sayings, narrowing the social distance with consumers, achieving the best promotional effect, and constructing customer identity. It is the speaker's hope that the hearer will decide whether to implement a certain behavior through understanding the truth or meaning expressed by the common sayings. For example:

(7) A: <u>生命在于运动嘛</u>，我之前就坐办公室办公，天天加班，实在不行才辞职的，现在不仅自己坚持运动还来健身房工作，顺便也能得到更专业的指导训练，咱家的私教可都是专业的，绝不弄虚作假！"

In example (7), judging from the salesperson's words "天天加班，实在不行才辞职的", she believes that good health is more important and will definitely make further suggestions. Salespeople use the proverb "生命在于运动" to convey the idea that in daily life, if you want to be healthy, you need to exercise more. They indirectly suggest to hearers that you should exercise more after meals, and then use themselves as example to shape their customer identity, forming a closer social distance. Similar identities are more likely to resonate emotionally, and evaluations or

suggestions from the customer's perspective are more easily accepted by consumers.

Table 2 Identity Categories Constructed of Speech act of suggestions

Directive Speech act of suggestion	Conventional Speech act of suggestion	Non-conventional Speech act of suggestion
Knowledgeable expert Amicable expert	Peer identity Seller identity	Weaker identity Customer identity

5. Rapport Orientation Features in Sales Speech Act of Suggestions

In Spencer-Oatey's view (2008), the rapport orientation is one of the factors that affect communicators' use of pragmatic strategies, including the "rapport-enhancement" orientation, "rapport-maintenance" orientation, "rapport-neglect" orientation, and "rapport-challenge" orientation. Given that the sales speech act of suggestion in this study is a pragmatic strategy implemented by salespeople to minimize or avoid negative impressions caused by a certain speech act on the mediator, enhance the acceptability of discourse, shorten social distance, and establish harmonious interpersonal relationships, the part focuses on analyzing the rapport orientation of identity construction in sales suggestion discourse from two aspects: the "rapport-enhancement" orientation and the "rapport-maintenance" orientation.

5.1 Rapport-Maintenance Orientation

During the conversation, if salespeople criticize or make negative comments about customers, such as expressing dissent or denial, dissatisfaction, and warnings, which undoubtedly pose a potential threat to their face or social rights. Therefore, in the sales process, mediators will adopt a way of adjusting their suggestion language to reduce the occurrence of such situations and maintain harmonious relationships. For example, the construction of "knowledgeable expert", "friendly expert", and "seller" is based on the orientation of "rapport-

maintenance", as shown in the following example:

(8) "A: 家长您好，我是 XX 美好童心美术教育机构的刘老师，我有留意到您这边有看过我们的相关美术课程，需要我帮您介绍一下吗？"

B：嗯，好。

A：好的，咱们美好童心美术教育机构创办于 2009 年，是一所专门的美术培训机构，以"艺德为先，品质为本"为办学宗旨，以"重质量"为教学目标，注重基础，培育孩子的审美能力，突出技能技法，开发潜能，培养自信，树立学生正确的学习观和积极主动的学习态度。今年咱们画室搬到 XXX 新校区，新校区校区宽敞、明亮，学习环境幽静，艺术气氛浓厚，我们的专业教师主要都是来自全国最顶级的美院和专业艺术院校，都曾多数都是以优异的专业成绩考上各自院校的佼佼者，您要是考虑咱们学校的话，可以去官方查看一下咱们学校的往届学生成绩，要是来咱家学习绘画的话，孩子将来不仅培养了能力，艺术气质更是……

B：这样啊，那一学期的学费是多少啊？

A：学费方面，每个学校的收费方式各异，咱们学校主要以月付为主要方式，也就是每月初收费一次，收费标准按照上课频率的不同进行相应的调整。

B：噢噢，好的好的。

In Example (8), "我是 XX 美好童心美术教育机构的刘老师" is located at the beginning of the sentence, forming a complete speech act of suggestion with "去官网看看" and "要是来咱家学习绘画", reducing the degree of directive in the language, easing the sense of imposition of

suggestion on the hearer, and helping to maintain the hearer's face. The salesperson did not create a distant and overly polite social distance, nor did they directly ask the hearer to do a certain behavior. The speaker's involvement in the hearer's world decreased, and their degree of directive was weaker. Due to the face-threatening nature of the speech act itself, speakers also adjust the degree of instruction by changing the form of their discourse, constantly constructing new pragmatic identities to adapt to contextual changes, and possessing the pragmatic orientation of "rapport-maintenance".

5.2 Rapport-Enhancement Orientation

In sales venues, salespeople tend to establish harmonious interpersonal relationships and create a friendly atmosphere. When salespeople make suggestions, they will use mild persuasion. In addition, for the sake of maintaining face and politeness, they may intentionally reduce the intensity of instructions in the suggestions, thereby speakers will focus on using indirect speech acts to construct identities, such as "peer identity", "weaker identity", and "customer identity". For example:

(9) "A: 今天是咱家开店 1 周年，谢谢家人们这么多天的支持，为了表示对大家的感觉，我们一致认为应该给大家再多加点福利，所以把平时卖 49 元的蛋糕作为一份优惠，一份礼物送给一直支持我们、喜欢我们的家人们，若您在本店购买满 38 元，即可得到附赠原价 49 的草莓鲜切蛋糕！"

The subjective stance discourse marker "我们一致认为" in Example (5) indicates that the speaker has a strong supportive attitude towards the suggested content, enhances the affirmative tone of the discourse, makes the suggestion more beneficial to the hearer, and helps to bring the psychological distance closer. The use of intimate address forms and language particles constructs peer identity, making consumers feel that the merchant is recommending products as their own close friend, achieving emotional communication with consumers, and reflecting the "rapport-enhancement" orientation of the speech act of suggestion.

6. Conclusion

Based on corpus of sales representatives from various industries, this study examines the identity types constructed by sellers, the dynamic changes in identity types and the orientation features they present in sales communication from the perspective of pragmatic identity. It is found that sellers construct identities such as knowledgeable experts, amicable experts, peers, sellers, weaker individuals, and customers through direct or indirect speech act of suggestions. At the same time, different identity constructions adopt different ways of expression, such as direct statements, colloquialisms, address forms, and modal particles, to weaken or enhance the degree of instruction, which is the pragmatic rationale for sellers to construct different identities and demonstrates the "rapport-maintenance" and "rapport-enhancement" orientations. Moreover, the diverse identities constructed by sellers and the dynamic changes between different identities are aimed at adapting to different contextual factors in the communication process, building harmonious sales-customer relationships, and meeting the communication needs of "selling" products to customers.

Subsequent research will attempt to collect more diverse interactive language materials to further improve the study of speech act of suggestions and enrich the research on pragmatic identity theory and speech act of suggestions. The study of speech act of suggestions in sales interactions can not only enrich the research on speech act of suggestions in daily life, but also help to deeply analyze different forms of interpersonal interactions from the perspective of pragmatic identity construction.

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