



A Study on the Persuasion Strategies of Online Psychological Counseling from the Perspective of Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor

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Abstract. This study investigates the use of interpersonal grammatical metaphors, particularly mood metaphors, as persuasion strategies in online psychological counseling. A corpus of 150 question-and-answer interactions from a Chinese online counseling platform “Yixinli” was analyzed. Findings reveal that interrogative mood metaphors are predominant, often realized through rhetorical questions to subtly convey advice without direct assertion. Overall, mood metaphors facilitate three key strategies: avoiding confrontational tones via indirectness, fostering rapport through empathetic projection, and stimulating counsees’ self-reflection through open-ended questions. This study highlights how mood metaphors enable psychological counselors to construct a flexible, modest and harmonious discourse for persuasion.

Keywords: Online Psychological Counseling, Interpersonal Grammatical Metaphor, Mood Metaphor, Persuasion Strategy.

1 Introduction

Psychological counseling is a “talking cure” practice [1] [2]. The process of psychological counseling is based on dialogue, in which the counselor attempts to understand and help regulate the feelings, attitudes, and behaviors of the counselee, thereby achieving the goal of improving the counselee’s condition [3]. Past research has indicated that counselors can use interpersonal grammatical metaphors to alleviate the relationship with the counselee, achieving more effective interpersonal interaction [4] [5] [6] [7].

Online psychological counseling is an emerging form of counseling, with various modes, including delayed interaction (websites, forums, blogs, emails, etc.) and instant text, voice, or video communication. Online psychological counseling has become an important component of contemporary mental health services, with an effectiveness no less than that of traditional psychological counseling [8]. Specifically, compared to traditional psychological counseling, online psychological counseling has advantages in terms of time and economic costs and the significance of popularizing psychological health knowledge [9].

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This paper takes the “Q&A” column on the website of the “Yixinli” online mental health service center as the research object, and explores the use of interpersonal grammatical metaphors and persuasion strategies in online psychological counseling replies.

2 Metaphor of Mood

Halliday [10] believes that interpersonal metaphors include mood metaphors and modality metaphors. For mood metaphors, Halliday points out that the four speech functions are realized by corresponding moods. Typically, the statement function is realized by the declarative mood, the question function is realized by the interrogative mood, and the command function is realized by the imperative mood, as shown in Fig. 1. Therefore, this one-to-one correspondence between the speech function category and the mood category is called the “congruent” realization of speech functions.

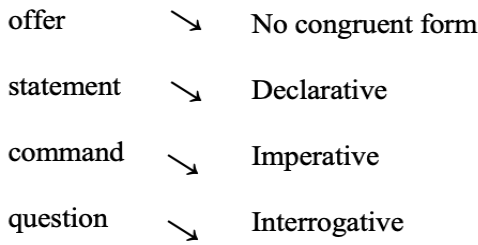


Fig. 1. Congruent realization of speech functions.

However, when people want to realize a certain speech function, they will judge and select the most appropriate mood from the language system according to the listener’s identity, status, and degree of intimacy with themselves in order to complete their communication. Consequently, in real discourse, one mood can express multiple functions, and one speech function can also be realized by different moods. This phenomenon of non-correspondence between mood and speech function is called the “metaphorical” realization.

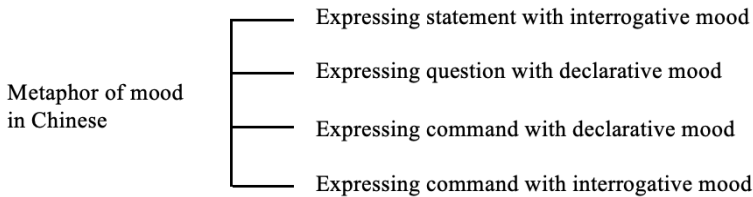


Fig. 2. Metaphor of mood in Chinese.

Based on Halliday’s theory of grammatical metaphor, and in combination with this paper, an analytical framework for mood metaphors in Chinese has been constructed as shown in above Fig. 2.

3 Research Methodologies

The present study takes the website of the “Yixinli” (<https://www.xinli001.com/>) Online Mental Health Service Center as the research object. This study focuses on the information provided in the “Q&A” section of the website. Through this platform, the center accepts inquiries from the public regarding mental health issues. Consultants and a professional team, including psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, and psychological counselors. After removing the privacy of the inquirers, the responses are published on the website for public access, thereby serving the purpose of answering common questions and disseminating relevant knowledge. 150 communication threads were randomly selected from the “Q&A” section of the website. Each thread contained a message from an inquirer and the most upvoted reply from a website expert. The language was Chinese, with a total word count of 67,832 words, averaging 452 words per thread.

Since the online Q&A platform allows browsing of inquirer questions and expert replies without logging in, there are no research ethics issues involved. Furthermore, to protect the privacy of the counselees, any sensitive content that could potentially reveal their identities was removed during the analysis of the dialogue content.

4 Metaphors of Mood in Online Psychological Counseling

Based on the mood metaphor classification framework of this study and data annotation, the usage characteristics of the four types of mood metaphors are as follows:

Table 1. Grammatical Realization of metaphor of mood in Chinese.

Type	Grammatical Realization Pattern	N	%
Expressing question with declarative mood	<i>Bù zhī</i> (Don't know)	43	12%
	<i>Duì mā</i> (isn't it?)		
	<i>Xiǎng zhī dào nǐ duì cǐ dē</i> (Want to know your understanding on this)		
	<i>Xiǎng tīng tīng nǐ de kàn fǎ</i> (I want to know your ideas)		
Expressing command with declarative mood	<i>Wǒ rú guǒ shì nǐ, huì</i> , (If I were you, I would...)	86	24%
	<i>Zài cǐ qíng kuàng xià...shì gèng míng zhì de</i> (In this situation...is wiser)		
	<i>Shì hěn hǎo de xuǎn zé</i> (... is a good choice)		
Expressing statement with interrogative mood	<i>Jiàn yì nǐ...</i> (Suggest you...)	154	43%
	<i>Nán dào</i> (Isn't it that...)		
Expressing command with interrogative mood	<i>...bù shì...ma?</i> (Isn't it...)	75	21%
	<i>...zěn me kě néng</i> (How is it possible...)		
	<i>...bù shì gèng hǎo ma?</i> . (Isn't it better...?)		
	<i>Wèi shén me bù qù...ne?</i> (Why not...?)		
	<i>Wǒ mén bù bù...?</i> (What if we...?)		
	<i>...kě yǐ ma?</i> (Is it okay to...?)		

From Table 1, it can be seen that in terms of mood metaphor types, the use of interrogative mood metaphors accounts for the majority in online psychological counseling replies. This result indicates that, language users in Chinese tend to use a large number of interrogative sentences to achieve metaphorical expressions, most of which are rhetorical questions. In Example 1, the respondent uses a rhetorical question to remind the counselee of the importance of emotional processing and implies that the psychological counseling subject should first process their emotions effectively to solve the problem.

- Zhǐ yǒu nín xiān chǔ lǐ hǎo zì jǐ de qíng xù, cái néng yǒu xīn lì qù jiě jué wèn tí, bù rán, qíng xù yǐ jīng bǎ nín de xīn lì hào jié le, zěn me néng yǒu xīn sī qù guǎn nà xiē wèn tí ne?
- Only when you deal with your own emotions first, can you have the energy to solve problems. Otherwise, your emotions have already drained your energy, so how can you have the mindset to deal with those problems? [Example 1]

Online psychological counseling, due to the need to take place on online platforms, cannot achieve face-to-face communication between the author and the reader. The use of interrogative sentences, especially rhetorical questions, can create a more flexible dialogue space compared to other sentence types. At the same time, since rhetorical questions ask questions from the opposite perspective and use questions to explain questions and answer questions, they can serve to strengthen the tone and provoke deeper thinking, bridging the distance between the reader and the author, making the persuasive discourse more immersive.

Declarative mood metaphors have a relatively lower proportion compared to interrogative mood metaphors, but their usage characteristics are prominent, typically accompanied by a change in the agent. In both forms of declarative mood metaphor realization, the agent shifts from being the psychological counseling counselee to being the respondent. In Example 2, the respondent does not ask directly but uses the grammatical form *xiǎng zhī dào* (want to know) to perform the questioning function to the counselee, shifting the subject of the sentence from the counselee involved in campus violence to the respondent themselves. This enhances the sense of dialogue while softening the tone of the question, making it more acceptable.

- Xiǎng zhī dào nǐ duì yú cān yù xiào yuán bào lì zhè yī guò wǎng de dāng xià xīn jìng.
- I would like to know your current state of mind regarding your past involvement in campus violence. [Example 2]

In terms of the speech functions realized by mood metaphors, mood metaphors in online psychological counseling replies mostly express command functions, followed by statements and questions. In online psychological counseling, counsees seek psychological help from experienced psychological healers, and counsees usually need to listen to the respondents' suggestions to meet their communicative needs. However, since online psychological counseling is different from traditional doctor-patient communication, with relatively equal power between the counselee and the respondent, and the counselee is often in an emotionally unstable state, metaphors need to be used when

giving suggestions, adopting a more subtle way of persuasion. For example, in Example 3, the psychological counseling expert does not directly make suggestions to the counselee but uses an interrogative mood metaphor to encourage the counselee to try to understand themselves better and cultivate positive thinking, achieving a mitigating effect on the discourse.

- Dui yú lèi sì de gè rén chéng zhǎng wèn tí, wèi shén me bù shì zhe gèng duō de tàn suǒ hé liǎo jiě zì jǐ, bìng cháng shì jiàn lì gèng jī jí hé chí jiǔ de zì wǒ rèn zhī ne?
- For similar personal growth issues, why don't you try to explore and understand yourself more, and attempt to build a more positive and lasting self-perception? [Example 3]

Additionally, there are relatively few grammatical metaphors expressing the questioning function, as the interaction in online psychological counseling is discontinuous. It generally consists of the counselee stating the problem and the respondent answering the problem in one round of interaction. Therefore, even if the respondent poses a question, they would not receive a response from the counselee. Consequently, most interrogative sentences are metaphorically realized through declarative moods. Furthermore, in online psychological counseling replies, the questioning function is embodied through self-addressed questions, meaning that the addressee of the questioning is not the psychological counseling subject but is typically a self-directed rhetorical question.

- Rú hé yǔ liàn rén jiàn lì liáng xìng guān xì? liàn ài yě shì rén jì guān xì de yī zhǒng, wǒ men bǎ tā chēng wéi qīn mì guān xì. qīn mì guān xì shì jiàn lì zài píng děng de hù xiāng zūn zhòng xìn rèn hé guān xīn jī chǔ zhī shàng de ...
- How can one establish a healthy relationship with a romantic partner? A romantic relationship is a type of interpersonal relationship which we call an intimate relationship. An intimate relationship is built on the foundation of equality, mutual respect, trust, and care for each other.... [Example 4]

As shown in Example 4, although the counseling expert poses a question with the questioning function *Rú hé yǔ liàn rén jiàn lì liáng xìng guān xì?* (How to establish a positive relationship with your lover?), there is no intention for the counselee to answer it themselves. Provoking the reader's thought and attention is the purpose.

Thus, in psychological counseling, mood metaphors facilitate mainly 3 strategies that foster empathy and non-confrontational openness. Firstly, the extensive use of interrogative moods to realize statements or commands avoids direct assertions or imperative tones. Through rhetorical devices like rhetorical questions, counselors can convey suggestions or advice in a more subtle yet equally impactful manner. Another common form is using declarative moods to express commands while simultaneously employing person shifts, projecting oneself into the counselee's situation with expressions like *Wǒ rú guǒ shì nǐ* "If I were you" This empathetic strategy mitigates the coerciveness of commands, enhancing rapport and credibility. Secondly, mood metaphors often present propositions or recommendations through interrogative or rhetorical question forms. This open-ended strategy allows counselees room for contemplation and choice, aligning with the equal expert-consultee relationship in modern healthcare. The ambiguity

leaves space for counselors' subjective judgments, fostering a flexible, modest, and harmonious interactive atmosphere. Thirdly, mood metaphors facilitate multiple interactive functions beyond direct persuasion, such as prompting self-reflection, awareness, and action intention in counselees. The metaphorical questions and rhetorical devices can stimulate thought, attention shift, and rational acceptance, while the figurative language injects liveliness and emotional appeal, enabling experiential understanding.

5 Conclusions

This study explored the use of mood metaphors as persuasion strategies in online psychological counseling replies. Findings reveal mood metaphors, especially interrogative forms like rhetorical questions, enable counselors to convey suggestions indirectly and mitigate commands, fostering a non-confrontational atmosphere. Mood metaphors facilitate three key strategies: avoiding confrontational tones, fostering rapport through empathetic projection, and stimulating self-reflection via open-ended forms. Overall, mood metaphors constitute a crucial linguistic resource for constructing a flexible, modest and harmonious persuasive discourse tailored to online counseling's unique expert-counselee dynamic. This study provides insights into the pragmatics of effective therapeutic communication in emerging online mental health services.

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