Original Paper

A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Online Shopping Reviews from the Engagement of Appraisal Theory—Take Taobao Electronic Products Online Shopping Reviews as Example

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Abstract

Online shopping has developed into a popular mode of consumption. Many e-commerce platforms offer customer feedback mechanisms, and customers can rate products after purchase. In addition to advice from retailers, reference opinions are also provided for potential consumers. Consumers can use reviews to interact with potential consumers. Therefore, from a linguistic perspective, this interactive process has an interpersonal meaning. This paper used engagement of appraisal theory to analyze and compare Chinese and English online shopping reviews concerning the engagement and its distribution. 100 Chinese online shopping comments and 100 English online shopping comments about the same type of electronic products were selected, then they were organised, categorised and analysed according to the theoretical framework. The conclusions are that Chinese and English consumers can change the level of discursive responsibility through engagement resources, thus expanding or narrowing the space of dialogue with potential consumers, and secondly English consumers tend to use accurate and clear intervening resources, while Chinese tend to use uncertain and vague engagement resources. From a cross-cultural perspective, this study can help Chinese and English potential consumers to identify evaluation resources, as well as suggestions for Chinese and English businesses on how to internationalize their products.

Keywords

engagement, appraisal theory, online reviews, cross-culture

1. Introduction

In the digital world, it has become commonplace for consumers to shop online rather than in physical shops. Online shopping offers consumers new and convenient shopping channels without time and space restrictions. After customers have purchased goods in online shops, they can directly rate the products they have already purchased. Normally, positive and negative reviews about products or services as well as the feelings of purchase that can influence consumers' purchasing decisions of potential consumers. The results from Utz and Kerkhof (2012) showed that customer reviews not only influence the choice of potential customers, but also the credibility of merchants, because buyers have limited knowledge about products in online shops and they cannot see and touch the real products. Therefore, most shoppers read online shopping reviews before purchasing goods to get more information about the products. The majority of studies on online shopping reviews are mainly concerned with the impact of reviews on customers' purchasing decisions. In terms of linguistics, reviews in online shopping have an importance effect on the interpersonal relationship. It is worth analysing their interpersonal meaning from the perspective of functional linguistics. Although researchers from home and abroad tried to investigate different types of text using appraisal theory, the analysis of online shopping reviews from the respect of engagement has never been sufficient. The objective of the present paper is to explore the similarities and differences between Chinese and English engagement resources in Chinese and English online reviews and to offer suggestions to potential consumers and retailers from a cross-cultural perspective. This study hopes to provide effective methods to identify review resources for potential consumers and to help improve products and service for online retailers.

2. Literature Review

Online shopping reviews can make suggestions to retailers and offer a judgement to potential consumers. Foreign studies on online shopping reviews are mainly concerned with the impact of reviews on customers' purchasing decisions. Lee and Han (2007) stated that consumers' purchasing decisions are influenced by negative comments. Negative comments usually contain more information that is hidden in online shops. The study by Nettelhorst, Brannon and Hill (2013) studied relationships between the levels of customer reviews and assessments of products by potential consumers. Results show that the attitudes of reviews would affect consumers. The above studies were mainly concerned with the perspective of evaluators and potential consumers, where the inherent interpersonal relationships between them were not investigated. In 2005, appraisal theory, which was introduced by Martin and White (2005) in the book *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal* has become popular. There have been some studies abroad from the perspective of attitude from this theory. The essay by Mikulová (2018) analyzed the expression of emotion in German and Croatian football reports. The phrases were discussed from the perspective of attitude to find out how emotions are expressed through football commentary. The article by Korenek and Šimko (2014) evaluated the emotions of Weibo posts from the perspective of attitude.

In recent years some Chinese scholars have begun to study reviews with the help of appraisal theory. Among those articles, texts can be mainly characterized from two aspects. The first aspect is about customer reviews based on three subsystems of evaluation theory. The second aspect is that the customer reviews are only analyzed with the help of Attitude. The following studies contain analyses from the perspective of appraisal theory. Li (2014) showed the similarities and differences between English customer reviews in the distribution of review resources and how commentators use the resources to build relationships. Another researcher studied customer reviews on the website of Taobao. The distribution of the rating resources of Chinese customer reviews was the subject (Li, 2017). From the aspect of attitude, the survey from Yang (2019) focused on the distribution of attitude resources and the expression of interpersonal meanings of online speakers. But in the field of Engagement, Bie (2010) conducted a study of online shopping reviews on Taobao, discussing which engagement resources shoppers like to use in online shopping reviews. The article by Liu and Xu (2018) compared the use of engagement resources in English and Chinese political editorial discourse.

However, from the perspective of engagement, there are still few contrastive studies between Chinese and English online shopping review. As a branch of functional linguistics, Chinese and English customer reviews can be compared from this aspect, therefore the differences between them and the interpersonal meanings can be studied.

3. Theoretical Foundation and Methodology

3.1 Engagement

Engagement describes the linguistic resources, with which speakers or authors express their value positions. Engagement is divided into monoglossic and heterglossic. Monoglossic normally refers to declarative sentences, expresses a single position and has no dialogism. Because there is a form of dialogue between author and reader, interpersonal meanings exist between them. This paper mainly examines the interpersonal meanings of online shopping reviews. Therefore, monoglossic is not addressed. Martin (2005) defined heterglossic as a sentence with dialogism. The dialogism mentioned here is a fictional dialogue between author and reader. Usually, authors imagine a potential readership before writing and expect their written or spoken expressions to influence readers. Therefore, interpersonal meanings between authors and readers can be scrutinized with engagement. The voices of authors or discourses are divided into Dialogic Contraction and Dialogic Expansion. Authors may negotiate with readers by expanding or contracting the conversational space.

The two forms of Dialogic Contraction are Disclaim and Proclaim. Disclaim (e.g. not, none) usually contains negative formulations that turn expectations into the opposite. Disclaim shows that one refuses to accept the opinions of others. There is no room for negotiation, and this restricts the space for dialogue between author and reader. Proclaim (e.g. of course, it is true) means full affirmation. Authors use proclaim, to express their own views. This shows the legitimacy of opinions. The absolute confirmations also narrow the dialogue space.

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Dialogic Expansion is divided into Entertain and Attributes. Entertain (e.g. it seems, perhaps, probably) refers to authors who can accept other views. There is room for negotiation between the author and the reader. This opens up the dialogue space. Attributes (e.g., according to someone's view) consists of quoting what someone else says when evaluating. This means that external voices are used in evaluations. Through attributes it can be implied that the author's views are open. Therefore, other ideas can exist and the dialogue space is expanded. Wang (2001) argued that Language users use engagement to regulate the responsibility and obligation for what they have said or written. With the support of engagement, authors can convince readers to change or not change their views. This allows authors to build interpersonal relationships with readers.

In this paper, Engagement can be used to regulate the relationships between consumers and potential consumers. Dialogic Contraction concerns the consumers expressing themselves about products or retailers in an absolutely positive or negative way. Expressions of engagement can be realized through grammar. Through this means, consumers may reject the views of potential consumers and reduce their space for communication. Subsequently, consumers use Dialogic Expansion to express doubt or quote what others say. Potential consumers must judge from their own experience whether the information provided by consumers is reliable. Therefore, potential consumers can get multiple meanings from the reviews. The space for dialogue between them is also expanded. Consumers influence the purchasing decisions of potential consumers, regulate their distance to potential consumers through engagement.

3.2 Data

The online shopping reviews in the study were collected from two websites: www.taobao.cn and www.aliexpress.com. To ensure the validity of the comparison between the Chinese and English customer reviews, the Chinese and English reviews were identical in terms of products and quantities. Because the ratio of quantities between good, medium and bad comments is inconsistent, the selected data was derived from the average proportions calculated from the ratios of all selected transactions. Good comments, moderate comments and bad comments are distributed differently. To ensure the objectivity of the corpus as far as possible, customer reviews of electronic products with relatively few historical and cultural differences were selected. The selected product types include mobile phones, hairdryers, electric toothbrushes, speakers, headphones and Kindle Paperwhite. The criteria for selection are that they are popular electronic products on Chinese and English websites. The word count for each Chinese customer review should be within 10-300. The number of words per English customer review should be within 10-200. This can ensure that the amount of information of Chinese and English customer reviews is approximately the same.

4. Analysis

4.1 Engagement Resources

The following examples include many engagement resources. By understanding these, it is possible to recognize how consumers create interpersonal relationships through engagement resources.

Example 1: **可能***[Engagement: Entertain] 电动牙刷就是这样的，震动幅度较大，但刷完牙很干净。*

It is an evaluation of an electronic toothbrush. In example the Entertain resource "可能" is used. This shows that the consumer is unsure about their views. From the description, it can be seen that the quality of the toothbrush may be problematic. This uncertain expression is easy to make potential consumers think, because the sentence is not an absolutely positive or absolutely negative sentence. At the same time, the consumer is not responsible for his words, so that he alienates the relationship with potential consumers.

Example 2: *咨询了戴森的***客服，解释***[Engagement: Attribute] 是套装风口有问题，要观察一段时间。*

The example demonstrates the use of the attribute resource "客服...解释" which introduces voices from third-party providers. Due to a problem with the hairdryer, the explanation of the customer service is quoted by the attribute resource. The quote from customer service appears to be objective. Therefore, customer shifts the responsibility away from himself, he merely restates the content. The customer does not show his own position and does not encourage a connection with potential consumers.

Example 3: *接口插***不***[Engagement: Disclaim] 了！手势翻页的时候，经常***没***[Engagement:Disclaim] 反应，给我***没***[Engagement:Disclaim]用的错觉，还会直接***不***[Engagement: Disclaim]工作了。*

Here the disclaimer resources "不" and "没" are used. These words indicate that the customer negates the information in the sentence. The first occurrence of "没" indicates that there is a problem with the charging line, which reflects objective quality problems with the product. This reduces the space for dialogue between consumers and potential consumers while providing consumers with clear product information. The second word "没" and the third word "不" in the customer review refer to the Kindle's faulty screen. Again, this reduces the space for dialogue between consumers and potential consumers. In the customer review, the consumer uses four disclaim resources, which can be used to directly describe negative features. He convinces potential consumers with the help of his self-confident forms of expression.

*Example 4: I can **only** agree with the negative reviews [Dialogic Contraction: Proclaim]. In the water you can **only** hear [Dialogic Contraction: Proclaim] the constant sounds of the water current and the air bubbles, but **hardly** any of the music. [Dialogic Expansion: Disclaim] The player **only** holds [Dialogic Contraction: Proclaim] with a bathing cap. In addition, switching off the microphones did not lead to any change. **Presumably** [Dialogic Expansion: Entertain] defective[...]*

When evaluating the Bluetooth headset, the identical proclaim resource "only" is used three times. The customer uses the first "only" to indicate that he or she is very sure that he or she can only give a poor rating, and the second "only" and the third "only" to indicate that he or she is sure that the product experience is not good. The disclaim resource "hardly" also shows that the user experience is not satisfactory. All three Proclaim resources and the Disclaim resource show that the customer is very certain about their experience and there is no room for negotiation, which limits the dialogue space and allows potential consumers to clearly evaluate the product. He takes responsibility for what they want to say. The customer clearly communicates potential consumers that the expectations and requirements of the

product cannot be fulfilled. This discourages them from buying the product. However, in the end, the customer uses the Entertain resource "presumably" to express that he recognized a problem with the product quality and suspects that it was possibly defective. The Entertain resource provides a possible product property and a reference option for potential consumers. This expands the conversation space as potential consumers can also make considerations on this basis. At the same time, it also shows that the customer is not confidently. Consumers are alienated from potential consumers from potential consumers without explicit advice. This is not conducive to the realization of interpersonal meaning.

*Example 5: My wife wouldn't want to be **without** this hairdryer [Engagement: Disclaim]. (**she says** [Engagement: Attributes]) And she has already had many different models. [...]*

The customer uses the attribute resource "she says" in example to refer the words to his wife. This shows that he avoids the responsibility of the discourse and that his words only reflect his wife's point of view. His wife uses the disclaim resource "without" to convey her true love for the hairdryer.   The customer who writes the review gives potential consumers a space to think, distancing himself from potential consumers to a certain extent.

4.2 Comparison of Engagement Resources

The above analysis shows that both Chinese and English consumers use engagement resources to regulate relationships with potential consumers. By comparing Chinese-English engagement resources, one can recognize the linguistic characteristics of both.

Table 1. Distribution of Chinese and English Engagement Resources

Engagement		Dialogic Contraction		Dialogic Expansion		Total
		Disclaim	Proclaim	Entertain	Attribute	
Chinese	number	42	23	30	5	100
	percent	42%	23%	30%	5%	100%
English	number	48	32	11	9	100
	percent	48%	32%	11%	9%	100%

The Table above shows that the Dialogic Contraction resources are used most frequently by Chinese and English consumers. Attribute resources are used the least. They account for 5% in Chinese customer reviews and 9% in English customer reviews. This shows that consumers in both countries do not like to quote the words of others in order to avoid the responsibility of the discourse. The difference between Chinese and English online shopping reviews is that Chinese consumers use Entertain resources more than English. Therefore, the Chinese consumers prefer to express vague attitudes, while English prefer

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to express clear prefer to express clear attitudes. In customer reviews, Chinese consumers like the words 可能,或许,推测,怀疑 to express uncertain opinions about things. They liked to use the words 没,不,肯定,绝对,就是,老实说,说实话 which means that they are very sure about their views. English consumers use these words *perhaps, it seems ..., sceptic, probably* to indicate that they are not sure. In addition, they use the words *of course, not, never, by and large, absolutely* etc. to express their opinions. The Chinese and English engagement resources are similar in word semantics. Since the classification of the evaluation theory is based on the semantics of the vocabulary, they behave the same in terms of vocabulary.

4.3 Intercultural Implications

Due to the cultural differences between various nationalities, there are certain differences in the linguistic expressions used by Chinese and English consumers. In this part, suggestions can be offered to potential consumers and traders from an intercultural point.

Linguistic expressions have the obvious purpose of guiding potential consumers to buy goods. Based on the above conclusions, when reading, pay attention to adverbs and sentence models. For example, English consumers like to use *really, very, absolute purchase recommendation* etc. But Chinese people like to use ambiguous expressions. The consumers prefer entertain resources 可能, 比较, 好像, 有点, 也许 etc., to express vague viewpoints. When English consumers see many uncertain language expressions in Chinese online shopping reviews, they should not be skeptical about those comments, it is just the language habits in Chinese people's expression. In Chinese customer reviews, customer services are mentioned more than in English. In contrast to information about customer service, potential consumers can recognize in advance what the disadvantages of a of a product are. And the both retailers should focus on higher product quality standards. If retailers want to sell their products abroad, they can conduct surveys on consumer reviews. In addition, they should improve customer service skills and should conduct professional training for overseas e-commerce staff according to the results of survey. In this way Chinese and English retailers can open up better foreign market.

5. Conclusion

The current paper is a comparative study of Chinese and English customer reviews. The investigations revealed that Chinese and English customer reviews show both similarities and differences. Chinese and English consumers are able to narrow or expand the space with potential purchasers through engagement resource. From the engagement resources, it can be seen that the English assessment of things is clear. Compared to that, the Chinese tend to be vaguer, which also shows that the Chinese do not come to conclusions easily and tend to express their opinions cautiously. Both countries have different attitudes towards things: English's direct attitude and China's euphemistic attitude. The difference can inspire the two countries in their exchange. As globalization continues to expand, the Chinese are interacting more and more closely with English countries. They can express their attitudes more directly, which can improve the efficiency of communication between the two sides.

From an interpersonal level, the study can help consumers realize the goal of conviction and help potential consumers better identify engagement resources and thus make rational purchasing decisions. For the retailers, the study's analysis of reviews can help both sides' products to be better accepted and improve their international product competitiveness. Although some conclusions have been drawn in this study, there are still some limitations. The amount of data in the paper is not large. If one wants more accurate data, one needs to increase the number of customer reviews. In addition, symbols and images appeared in the online shopping reviews, which can be combined by follow-up researchers for further research.

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