

EVALUATIVE DEVICES IN PERSONAL NARRATIVES FROM AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE TALK SHOWS

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SUMMARY

Since the dawn of mankind, narratives have exercised significant effects on human life as a means of transferring experiences and reinforcing relationships. However, not many studies about aspects of oral narratives can be traced, especially in the realm of cross – linguistic research. This paper, hence, aims to investigate evaluative strategies employed in some American and Vietnamese TV talk shows, which was represented by two research questions regarding the similarities and differences between the two sets of narrative evaluation. Fifteen personal narratives were extracted from five well – known TV talk shows in the U.S, and the other fifteen from five Vietnamese counterparts. These excerpts were transcribed and subsequently analysed, through descriptive and contrastive methods, to seek the answers to the research questions. The findings of the paper illustrate that American and Vietnamese narrators share preferences of using certain evaluative elements but utilize several lexical devices differently, which might generate from disparity in narrating style or cultural factors. It is hoped that the theoretical contributions and practical applications of the study would be of help in the light of both semi – institutional communication and pedagogical purpose.

Key words: *narrative; evaluation; talk shows; conversational analysis; contrastive linguistics*

INTRODUCTION

It goes without saying that narratives play a principal role in human communication, and that investigating linguistic features to construct an effective narrative is of paramount importance. Ample research, therefore, has gone to illuminate aspects of narratives. Historically, the research concentrated on complex narrative as long – standing literacy or oral traditions [1]. With the interest in simpler narratives serving fundamental their functions, Labov & Waletzky (1967) [2] pioneered in investigating oral narration by analyzing monologic stories about subjects' "life threatening experiences". Subsequently, narratives began to be recognized as a larger section of talk called conversational narratives. These stories are found naturally in daily conversations and are featured by interactive nature and co – authorship [3], [4], [5]. Also, studies in storytelling from institutional settings, such as law and language, organizations, and health care, have

contributed to the literature of narratives, particularly since the late 1970s.

Nevertheless, the literature of conversational narratives appears to be limited to either daily or institutional occasions. With the emergence of entertaining programs on the mass media like TV talk shows, further research in semi – institutional context is required. In recent years, TV talk shows have gained their increasing popularity, particularly thanks to the exploitation of narratives. That very little has been done in this mixture of daily and institutional discourses has left a gap to be filled [6].

An effective narrative is supposed to fulfill simultaneously two functions: *referential* – reporting what happened or would happen; and *evaluative* – the teller communicates the meaning of the narrative by establishing some point of personal involvement [2]. Evaluation makes a critical contribution to the production of narratives as without it, a story cannot be complete and has no point. However, as there exist cultural disparities in narrative construction and criteria of a "good

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narrative”, speakers of different languages value evaluation at different degrees [5]. Therefore, it is necessary to uncover specific evaluative elements to attract TV show audiences from different linguistic backgrounds.

Above are the brief literature and rationale for this paper with two research questions:

1. What evaluative devices are similarly employed in personal narratives from American and Vietnamese TV talk shows?
2. How are evaluative devices in American and Vietnamese TV talk shows different from each other?

The answers would provide more insights into narratives and help language learners communicate successfully with native – like storytelling styles.

RESEARCH METHODS

Corpus

The paper works on transcripts of 30 narratives extracted from 30 TV talk show episodes aired from 2009, 15 American and 15 Vietnamese. The selected episodes include several personal narratives each and the sensitive topics are avoided. The hosts and guests are of different age groups and genders, to guarantee the objectivity of the research. Five American talk shows are *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *The Ellen DeGeneres Show*, *Larry King Live*, and *Late Show with David Letterman*. The five Vietnamese counterparts include *Người đương thời* [Current people], *Lần đầu tôi kể* [Told for the first time], *Nói ra đừng sợ* [Dare say], *Sức sống mới* [New vitality], and *Ghế không tựa* [Stool].

Data analysis and coding scheme

The data were transcribed using the simplified version of Jefferson Transcription System. Descriptive and contrastive methods were employed to figure out the similarities and differences in the use of evaluative elements. The frequencies of linguistic items were

subjected to a chi – square test with result compared to significance level $\alpha = 0.05$.

Choosing an appropriate framework of narrative evaluation is not easy as each model has its own pros and cons; and they overlap in some way. In this paper, some of the most salient categories were selected from models suggested by Labov (1972) [7], Peterson & McCabe (1983) [8], and Bamberg & Damrad-Frye (1991) [9] as follow:

1. *Frames of mind* are the references to mental and affective states of characters.
2. *Hedges* are expressions of the narrator's uncertainty with respect to the truth value of what is uttered (e.g. *kind of*, *hình như*)
3. *Negative qualifiers* consist of references to negative states and actions that might have taken place, but did not.
4. *Character speech* constitutes an alternative perspective but results in immediacy and vividness to the story.
5. *Causal connectors* establish cause – and – effect relationship between events.
6. *Gratuitous terms* are lexical devices that intensify or stress what they modify (e.g. *vấn (still)*, *very*)
7. *Similes* and *metaphors* are used to compare one concept to another more commonly known concept.
8. *Words per se/ phrase per se* include lexical items that are “in and of themselves” evaluative” [8] (e.g. *thực ra (in fact)*, *interesting*).
9. *Repetition* refers to the same word/ phrase repeated more than one time to emphasize or suspend a specific action.
10. *Exclamation* includes such devices as “ah” and “wow” to signal a speaker's attitude.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The distributions of the evaluative devices in the two languages are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Distribution of evaluative techniques in personal narratives from Vietnamese and American talk shows*

Techniques	American narratives	Vietnamese narratives
Frames of mind	25 (10.9%)	43 (15.2%)
Hedges	6 (2.3%)	7 (2.5%)
Negative qualifiers	21 (8.2%)	22 (7.8%)
Character speech	29 (11.3%)	25 (8.8%)
Causal connectors	48 (18.7%)	38 (13.4%)
Gratuitous terms	28 (10.9%)	49 (17.3%)
Similes & Metaphors	7 (2.7%)	3 (1.1%)
Words/ phrases per se	70 (27.2%)	80 (28.3%)
Repetition	10 (3.9%)	7 (2.5%)
Exclamation	10 (3.9%)	9 (3.2%)
TOTAL	257 (100%)	283 (100%)

From the data, it can be seen that evaluative items in the Vietnamese narratives (283) slightly outnumber those in the American counterparts (257). However, the chi-square test proves that their difference in number is not really significant ($p = 0.20 > \alpha = 0.05$). Regarding each category, both groups are in favor of using words/ phrases per se, gratuitous terms, frames of mind, causal connectors, character speech and negative qualifiers though the rates of their preferences are substantially different. The less preferred techniques including exclamation, hedges, repetition and similes & metaphors, by contrast, are relatively equal in proportion.

Cross – linguistic similarities

Word/ phrases per se

One feature of American data that resembles Vietnamese one is the extensive use of words/ phrases per se (27.2% and 28.3% respectively). Appearing in all thirty narratives, it is the most frequent device to describe the setting and characters more meticulously as well as convey the tellers' evaluation to the events. The following are two examples:

(1) Whitney Houston: ... It was *weird* ... that was pretty *intense*...

(The Oprah Winfrey Show, 14.09.2009)

(2) Trúc Nhân: Thì lúc đó hai chị em ngồi dậy bật khóc *ngon lành* luôn. Thì *ngay* ngày hôm sau Trúc Nhân về nhà...

(So at that time I and my sister burst into tears easily. Then the very next day, I returned home...)

(Stool, 08.11.2015)

In (1) the two occurrences of words per se *weird* and *intense* were used when the storyteller stepped out of the story and explicitly expressed her comment on the story. This is somehow closely associated with the function of external evaluation in Labovian model with which the narrator interrupts the narrative flow, turning to the listener directly and tells him/ her what the point is" (Labov, 1972) [7]. Meanwhile, in (2), the speaker intentionally supplied evaluative elements to make the story more interesting and clearer. Though they did not explicitly refer to the speakers' attitudes, they embedded well the point of the story, without which the story would be a plain and pointless list of actions.

Character speech

To increase the vividness of the narratives, the speakers could report what was said instead of what happened. The speakers could produce a direct speech like:

(3) Ricky Martin: I told her, "*What do you think if we bring these girls home?*"

(The Oprah Winfrey Show, 01.11.2010)

In other cases, character speech could be made indirectly, for instance:

(4) Trần Đăng Khoa: Tự nhiên *thầy kêu là em có năng khiếu toán, thi bên toán*.

(My teacher suddenly told me that I had maths aptitude and advised me to follow it)

(Current people, 11.03.2011)

It can be seen that character speech does not simply dramatize the stories. As an evaluative technique, it considerably distances the speakers from the plot – line. The utilization

of character speech is similarly favored by both groups of tellers, making it the third and the fifth frequently used strategy in American and Vietnamese stories. Though the frequency of Vietnamese character speech is slightly smaller than that of the American (8.8% and 11.3%), there is no significant statistical difference between them ($p = 0.36 > \alpha = 0.05$)

Negative qualifiers

The two languages roughly have the equal proportion occupied by this device in all evaluative strategies (7.8% and 8.2%). This device emphasizes what did not happen rather than what happened to mark the discrepancies that the narrators express with respect to some canonical – event knowledge. For instance, the negative expressions in (5) negated the involvement of people to effectively highlight the background for the teller's career:

(5) Chi Pu: Cả họ **KHÔNG** ai làm nghệ thuật cả. Cho nên **không** ai nghĩ mình lại đi theo con đường này.

(NONE of my relatives or family members works in the field of art. So no one thinks I pursue it.)

(Told for the first time, 22/05.2015)

Negative qualifier is also a helpful tool to strengthen the discrepancy between normal expectation and reality. In the following example, the character's special working experience is strongly emphasized with a negation:

(6) David Letterman: You worked summers and after school. But it *wasn't* grocery stores per se, was it? But it was a food industry.

(Late Show with David Letterman,
01.04.2009)

Repetition, exclamation, similes & metaphor, and hedges

Both of the American and Vietnamese narrators showed less preference to the use of repetition, exclamation, similes &

metaphors, and hedges, which each makes up no more than 4% of the total evaluative elements. Despite their modest numbers, they have notable impacts on conveying the speakers' emotions.

Cross – linguistic differences

Though American and Vietnamese evaluative strategies are similar to each other in number and in some categories, the distribution of gratuitous terms, frames of mind, and causal connectors differs from each other.

Gratuitous terms

Gratuitous terms can be compared with embedded evaluation of intensive lexical items in Labovian framework (1972) [7]. Differently termed, both of them strengthen the selected actions and features in some way.

In American data, the common gratuitous terms are *just*, *so*, and *very*. They could stress the actions that followed, like *just struck*, *just loved* or intensify attributes, like *so odd*, *so poorly* (The Tonight Show with Jay Leno, 13.12.2011). However, gratuitous terms in American stories were not employed as often as those in Vietnamese ones (10.9% compared to 17.3%). This striking difference is confirmed by the chi – square test result ($p = 0.04 < \alpha = 0.05$).

Gratuitous terms are the second popular evaluative element in Vietnamese stories. Such items as *mới* (just), *vẫn* (still), *quá* (too/so), *lắm* (very/ really), *khá* (*là*) (quite), *rất* (*là*) (very/ really), and *thậm chí* (even) are found frequently in every narrative. Among them *rất* (*là*) (very/ really) is the most common item. Vietnamese narrators were in favor of using gratuitous terms to intensify actions or features of events/ people. Especially, they are often spotted in companion with words/ phrases per se in adjective form, for instance *rất là giỏi* (very good), *rất là cơ bản* (very basic) (Told for the first time, 22/05.2015).

Frames of mind

The expressions for feelings and mental actions function to qualify the links between

subsequent events and evoke empathy and interest in the audiences. The excerpts below provide some instances of frames of mind:

(7) Whitney Houston: I was *horrified*. He spit on my face.

(The Oprah Winfrey Show, 14.09.2009)

(8) Lương Mạnh Hải: Mình lại rất *lo sợ* bố mẹ mình *suy nghĩ*... mình rất là là là *lo* cho gia đình mình sẽ *buồn*...

(It's funny that sometimes I am afraid my parents will be worried... I myself fear that they'll be sad...)

(Dare say, 30.12.2013)

Both the use of frames of mind by the American and Vietnamese shows no coincidence with the findings by Bamberg & Damrad Frye (1991) [9]. These two researchers claim that this evaluative device is a part of cause – effect relationship with the next actions. Yet frames of minds in the corpus are mainly for the purpose of expressing the characters' feelings and personal ideas.

Though frames of mind rank fairly high places in the narratives of both languages, their notable distinction in proportion leaves much concern. While only 10.9% of the evaluative elements in the American shows belong to frames of mind, this figure for Vietnamese shows is 15.2%. The difference implies that evaluative elements dealing with internal states are of greater preference in Vietnamese narration.

Causal connectors

Causal connectors are specially favored by the American narrators as nearly one – fifth of the evaluative elements are items to express cause – effect relationship between events and/ or states. *Because*, *since*, *so*, and *therefore* are some common instances of causal connectors. These items are often present within a sequence of events to the cause – effect link among them, for example:

(9) J. K. Rowling: I thought 'I can go to a quiet place'. So I came to this hotel *because* it's a beautiful hotel...

(The Oprah Winfrey Show, 01.10.2010)

Clearly, in American talk shows, causal connectors have been widely used to reason out the cause – effect connections of events though they are quite self – evident, making this device the second popular technique in narrative evaluation. The Vietnamese narrators, however, did not use it as often as the American speakers did. It seems to them that the arranging single accounts into chronological order is sufficient for a story when the causal links are explicit.

The discrepancies in the use of gratuitous terms, frames of mind and causal connectors imply the distinct narrating styles in the two languages. The American focus much on reasoning out loud the sequential relationships among events; meanwhile, the Vietnamese are interested in adding further information about characters' emotions and features of actions or details. This difference reflects the level of directness in communication: while the American communication tends to rely heavily on logic and technical information with special preference in linearity, the Oriental patterns of communication follow a circular model [10].

CONCLUSION

The paper has found some significant results. The Vietnamese and American evaluation domains coincide each other in most of the categories. The tellers from both cultures are fond of exploiting words/ phrase per se most and prefer the use of negative qualifiers and character speech to the other subtypes like exclamation, hedges, repetition, and similes & metaphors. The dissimilarities are observed in the Vietnamese preference of gratuitous terms and frames of mind, and the American favor of causal connectors as well.

These findings have revealed linguistic features to produce typical semi – institutional

stories in American and Vietnamese talk shows. They also facilitate learners to choose appropriate strategies in elaborating a story in the target language and avoid negative pragmatic transfer.

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TÓM TẮT

PHƯƠNG TIỆN BIỂU ĐẠT THÁI ĐỘ CỦA NGƯỜI KỂ CHUYỆN TRONG CÁC CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TALK SHOW CỦA MỸ VÀ VIỆT NAM

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Kể chuyện vốn có những ảnh hưởng quan trọng đến đời sống con người như một phương tiện truyền tải kinh nghiệm và củng cố các mối quan hệ. Tuy nhiên, khá ít nghiên cứu đề cập đến chuyện kể bằng ngôn ngữ nói. Vì vậy, mục đích nghiên cứu này là phân tích và tìm ra câu trả lời về những điểm giống và khác nhau trong cách sử dụng các phương tiện biểu đạt thái độ của người kể chuyện trong một số chương trình talk show của Mỹ và Việt Nam. Dữ liệu nghiên cứu bao gồm mười lăm chuyện kể từ năm talk show của Mỹ và mười lăm chuyện từ năm talk show Việt Nam. Các câu chuyện được ghi lại và phân tích bằng phương pháp mô tả và so sánh đối chiếu. Kết quả nghiên cứu chỉ ra rằng việc sử dụng các phương tiện biểu đạt thái độ của người Mỹ và Việt Nam trong các talk show này có cả sự tương đồng và khác biệt do phong cách kể chuyện và do các yếu tố văn hóa. Các kết luận này hi vọng sẽ giúp ích trong các tình huống giao tiếp bán trang trọng và cho mục đích giảng dạy.

Từ khóa: câu chuyện; thái độ; talk show; phân tích hội thoại; ngôn ngữ học đối chiếu

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