The Online Identity Construction of the Elderly Women— Take Chinese Discourse Marker "Ah" as an Example

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Abstract—Recently, the registration of the elder user in cyberspace roses repeatedly. More and more old people prefer to realize self-expression through the Internet, among which the elderly woman is the majority. Based on self-constructed corpus, this paper examines the pragmatic functions of the Chinese discourse marker "Ah", and discusses what kinds of pragmatic identity has been constructed. This paper discovers that, on the one hand, discourse marker "Ah" realizes topic organization function and interpersonal function; on the other hand, "ah" assists the elderly in constructing female identity, expert identity, elder identity and peer identity, and sometimes a compound identity of real and virtual identities so as to narrow the psychological distance with the audience and achieve the communicative purpose.

Index Terms—Cyber discourse, elderly women, identity construction, discourse markers, Ah

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the Internet has broken down age barriers and pervaded the lives of people of all ages. As a result, more and more old people integrate into cyberspace and share their lifestyles or personal comments by releasing videos. To meet the approval of the video viewers and win more "likes", constructing what kind of identity during online communication needs careful consideration. Thus, researches concerning the identity construction of online speakers are of significance. Previous studies are mainly about teachers' identity construction in online teaching, online corpus identity construction in crisis, and sub-cultural groups' identity construction on the Internet, but few focus on the elderly group. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the identity construction of elderly women in cyber discourse, analyzing the language features, and exploring the underlying purposes for building various identities in online videos.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Identity Construction

Pragmatic identity refers to the contextualized identity which is chosen by language users intentionally or unintentionally, as well as the identity of the social individual or group mentioned in the discourses. One or more than one specific identity can appear in one discourse [1]. At present, many scholars have explored the relationship between discourse and identity construction from various perspectives.

Bentley *et al.* [2] explore the process of academic identity construction among doctoral students. By studying the transcripts of their interviews, it is discovered that the identities that people can access as they progress in their careers may play an important role in their ongoing professional identity construction and career success. Yuan [3] studied the language features of the consultants and finds that expert identity, peer identity, and sales representative identity are respectively constructed at different stages of business conversation, which can be seen as the resources to realize the service function and interpersonal function of the speech. Guo [4] investigated the linguistic communicative characteristics of female scholars in the academic practice community under the framework of pragmatic identity theory, finding that female scholars construct scholar identity and female identity in the academic practice community, and regard it as a communicative resource and strategy to achieve communicative goals. However, it is discovered that the study about the elderly group is under-researched.

B. Discourse Markers and Identity Construction

Definitions of discourse markers are various but without consensus. Schiffrin [5] defines discourse markers as sequentially dependent elements which bracket units of talk. It must be syntactically independent of the sentence and in the starting position. Besides, discourse markers must have the characteristics of a certain rhythm and must work at the micro and macro levels of discourse. Schiffrin's definition enlightens the following studies of discourse marker analyses. Moreover, Chen [1] puts forward that people can construct their own pragmatic identity through the choice of words. Therefore, the hypothesis is reached that discourse markers may be concerned with identity construction. However, this idea has not been widely studied, leaving great research space.

Therefore, this paper, from the perspective of Chinese discourse markers, explores older women's identity construction in cyberspace. The next part of this paper shows a detailed corpus collection process.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Theoretical Framework

Based on the theory of pragmatic identity construction [1] and with the assistance of the grounded theory, this study explores how older women construct their identity dynamically in videos with the help of discourse markers. The collected data are annotated, classified, and analyzed according to the following steps.

B. Data Collection

The research corpus for this paper is selected from the

short video account "Grandma Wu", which has more than 643,000 fans on Tik Tok. Tik Tok is China's largest short video platform, where people post their own videos to share their lives or opinions. Five hot videos with thousands of clicks are casually chosen from the videos published in 2022. The total length of the five videos is about 46 minutes, and the phonetic translation software is adopted to get the text version of the corpus. Then after several times of manual checks, a small corpus with a library capacity of 10,730 words is obtained.

C. Data Analysis

Software ROSTCM 6 is applied for word segmentation. Then the segmented text is imported into AntConc 4.1.4 for analysis. Five Chinese discourse markers "Ah", "Ne", "Ya", "Ba", and "Ma" existing in the corpus are set as the keywords being input into the software respectively for retrieving frequency in the research text. The results are illustrated in the following Table I.

TABLE I: FREQUENCY OF ALL DISCOURSE ARKERS EXISTING IN THE CORPUS

Discourse Marker	Word Tokens	Percentage
Ah (啊)	167	2.64%
Ne (呢)	34	0.54%
Ya (呀)	31	0.49%
Ba (吧)	30	0.47%
Ma (吗)	13	0.21%
Total Tokens	6337	

As is demonstrated in the Table I, discourse marker "ah" accounts for 2.64% of the total tokens, which is much higher than the others. In order to verify the accuracy of the data, five Chinese discourse markers "Ah", "Ne", "Ya", "Ba", "Ma" are input into each transcription of the five videos as the keyword to retrieve the frequency. The results are represented in fig below.

The horizontal axis represents the video number studied in this paper, and the vertical axis represents the percentage of the frequency of the tokens of different discourse markers in each five videos. It is clear that the percentage of "ah" is much higher than that of other discourse markers in each video. Therefore, the hypothesis can be put forward that discourse markers are of research significance in Grandma Wu's discourse.
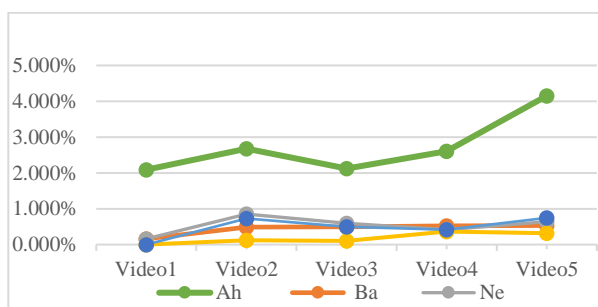

Fig. 1. Percentage of frequency of different discourse markers in five videos.

E. Research Questions

This paper aims to answer next two questions:

1) What pragmatic functions are realized by the Chinese discourse marker "Ah" in Grandma Wu's discourse?

2) What pragmatic identities did Grandma Wu construct by means of the function of "Ah" and what's her purpose?

IV THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF CHINESE DISCOURSE MAKER "AH"

A. Discourse Organization Function

1) Topic marking function

Topic markers refer to the discourse markers' control of the topic, which means they can guide the topic content and the topic order, and also change or end the topic. In Grandma Wu's discourse, the topic-marking function of "ah" is frequently used, as shown in Example 1:

Eg.1: 我奉劝年轻的孩子们啊，对自己的老爸老妈晚年的婚恋不要干预太多，把你们养了一辈子，人家晚年想找一个归宿，都是可以理解的。

[*I advise the young children ah, do not interfere too much in your single parent's late-life marriages. Having raised you almost all their life, they want to find a home in their old age. This is understandable*.]

In Example 1, "ah" introduces the content of the topic. Grandma Wu first offers a proposal at the beginning of the discourse, then "ah" is applied at the end of the first clause to continue the implicature of the first sentence that gives advice. At the same time the first "ah" leads the topic of the following words, that is, not to interfere too much in the marriage of the single parent in their later years. The use of "ah" makes the overall topic content more coherent and emphasizes the theme of the discourse. Besides, as a topic marker, "ah" also guides the topic sequence.

Eg.2: 类似新生儿呕吐的问题，新生儿脐带的护理啊，新生儿打挺儿的问题啊，新生儿大便多少次的问题啊，等等的啊，这些都不是疾病。

[*Problems like new born babies' vomiting, caring for the umbilical cord of the newborn ah, straightness of the newborn ah, the frequency of newborn's defecation ah, and so on. All things like these are not diseases.*]

In Example 2, Grandma Wu lists several normal problems for newborn babies. At the end of each example, Grandma Wu uses "ah" as a mark. To some extent, the pragmatic function of "ah" is equal to a comma, which represents the pause, but is more obvious than it. Besides, "ah" has the function of strengthening the tone. Grandma Wu emphasizes the content of each example through "ah" in order to arouse the listeners' attention.

2) Discourse cohesion function

The cohesive function of discourse markers include transitional cohesion, exemplary cohesion and continuous cohesion, all of which aim to improve the coherence of the discourse.

Eg.3: 咱们应该理解啊，老年男性的苦衷啊，啊跟老太太是不一样的啊，老年男性追求的是照顾，老年女性大多

追求的是实惠。

[*We should understand <u>ah,</u> the difficulties of the elderly men <u>ah,</u> <u>ah</u> which are different from the elderly women. The elderly men seek for care, and the elderly women pursue comfortable lives*.]

Example 3 is extracted from Grandma Wu's conclusion of grandpa Mo's story. Grandpa Mo has been in his seventies and wants to start a new family with grandma Chen. However, his thought causes strong opposition from his son. After having a big quarrel with his son, grandpa Mo gets sick and is sent to the hospital. In this video, as far as this story, Grandma Wu expresses her opinion that people should understand the difficulties of old men. At the same time, she points out the differences in life demands between old men and old women, from the perspective of a female, explaining that old men need more care in contrast to their counterpart women. In Example 3, the marker "ah" is repeated many times to serve as a cohesive function. The first two "ah" and the fourth "ah" emphasize the conversational meaning of previous sentences, such as "understanding", "difficulties" and "differences". The third "ah" represents both the continuation of the above topic and the transition of the subsequent point of view. In addition, the large magnitude usage of "ah" in this example weakens the role of each "ah", but strengthens their overall effect-enhancing the fluency of the whole discourse.

B. Interpersonal Interaction Function

1) Affective function

The affective function of discourse markers means that the speaker intends to express some specific emotions or aims to guide the expression of certain modality through the application of discourse markers, as shown in Example 4:

Eg.4 如果实在家里没有人，找一个小时工或者日工或者住家保姆都比较合适，价格也就最多五六千，可是月嫂就知道价格多少了啊，吓人吓人！

[*If there is really no one at home, it is recommended to find an hourly or daily worker, or a live-in nanny, whose price is at most five to six thousand, but how much does it costs to hire a maternity matron <u>ah</u> - how scary!*]

In this sentence, Grandma Wu expresses her strong disapproval of hiring maternity matrons for newborns, especially at extravagant prices. In this sentence, "ah" is preceded by the emphasis on price, and followed by a strong emotional word "scary" which both guides the speaker's emotional expression of the previous discourse and, as a modal particle, strengthens the mood in exclamatory sentences. Therefore, actually, "ah" in this sentence plays the role of emotional progression. If "ah" is removed, the sentence will become "*whose price is at most five to six thousand, but how much does it costs to hire a maternity matron - how scary!*". In Chinese, this sentence appears more emotional ups and downs compared with the original version.

Eg.5 年轻男性，我提醒你一下…… 生意兴隆，官运亨通，财源滚滚的时候，可要头脑清醒啊，对自己的原配老伴儿要好一点，让原配老伴多活几年，多陪你几年。

[*Young men, let me remind you…… When promotion and big fortunes come to you, please always keep a clear mind <u>ah</u> and be better to your original wife, so that she can live and accompany you for a few more years.*]

In this video, Grandma Wu exhorts men to treat their partners well when they are successful in their life so that they can have a happy later life. "Ah" in Example 5 serves as an affection of warning as well as persuading. "Ah" not only reinforces previous discourse content that warns the male audience to be kind to their original partner, especially at the peak of their career; but also, functions as a mitigation, reducing the tone of warning.

2) Attitudinal function

Attitudinal discourse markers refer to the speech attitudes expressed by the speaker, such as frankness, assertion, questioning, elucidating and negation.

Eg.6 如果一个老年人啊，经历了身经百战，各种病毒都经历过了，那么奥秘克戎来了，他有可能根本就不发病，所以老年人也不用都害怕啊，关键要看你本身的免疫功能。

[*If an elderly person has experienced various viruses, he or she may not suffer from the omicron disease at all. Therefore, the elderly need not be afraid of it. It is the immune function that matters.*]

The last "ah" in Example 6 serves as an elucidating statement, reinforcing the previous statement that there is no need for the elderly to excessively fear omicron. Though the removal of "ah" exert no effect on the semantics, it will be less expressive and emphatic at the tone level than adding "ah".

Eg.7 我当时紧张不紧张啊？我也有一点点紧张，但是我也不太紧张，因为我对发烧病人比较熟悉.

[*Was I nervous at that time <u>ah</u>? I'm a little nervous too, but not very much, because I'm familiar with people with fever.*]

Used to be a doctor, Grandma Wu by virtue of her past medical working experience, expresses her fear in the early days of the avian flu outbreak in Beijing in 2009. At that time many infected people suffered from pneumonia and the situation was quite similar to now. Grandma Wu was assigned to the medical frontline to cure the patients, but the protective measures are much simpler than now. In her video, Grandma Wu uses a rhetorical question to communicate with the audience. The discourse marker "ah" increases the interactive meaning of the whole sentence, narrowing the psychological distance from the audience. The application of "Ah" also guides the audience to compare the situation at that time with the current epidemic situation so that they could better understand Wu Grandma's following opinion that rushing to purchase medicine is useless.

V. DISCOURSE MARKER "AH" AND PRAGMATIC IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

On the base of the analysis of 167 samples, the framework concerning the identity construction of Grandma Wu is concluded below. Grandma Wu mainly constructs three kinds of ontological identity: female identity, expert identity, and elder identity, and one virtual identity: peer identity in terms of different contexts and situations. What's more, sometimes,

some ontological identity features may appear together or accompanied by a virtual identity that comprises a so-called compound identity, which is beneficial to fulfill the speaker's discourse goal.
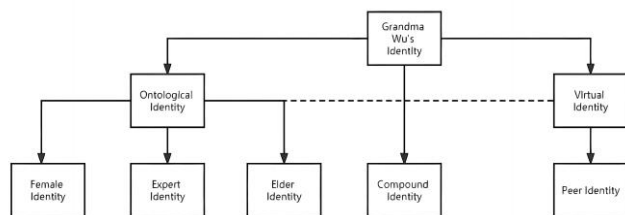

Fig. 2. Framework of Grandma Wu's identity construction.

A. Application of Ontological Identity

1) Female identity

Kendall and Tannen put forward the view of regarding gender as a pragmatic resource, pointing out that "gender identity has the attribute of social construction and gender is both directly and indirectly related to discourse [6]. Gender discourse is not only a restrictive factor in verbal communication but also a sort of resource". In the light of the observation of the samples, in some contexts, Grandma Wu applied "ah" to strengthen her female features in her monologue, constructing female identity.

First of all, Grandma Wu takes advantage of the affective function of the discourse marker "Ah" to strengthen female identity, to better resonate with female audiences. Compared with men, women would expose their emotions and thoughts more directly in communication [7], and also pay more attention to emotional communication [8]. In Example 4, Grandma Wu uses "ah" to strengthen her astonishment about paying exorbitant wages to maternity wives. This action of underlining emotional expression reflects underlying female identity. Because most audiences who are concerned about the problem of maternity matrons are mostly mothers. Thus, emphasizing female identity is conducive to narrowing the psychological distance between the speaker and the audience, receiving more agreement.

Secondly, when talking about sensitive topics related to gender, Grandma Wu does not adopt the way of weakening her female identity and carrying on the objective evaluation to ease the gender conflict. Instead, she strengthens femininity by "ah". In Example 3, by using three "ahs", she reinforces her female identity, making use of women's considerate features to express her compassion for older men, to appease conflicts.

Therefore, in terms of Grandma Wu's discourse practice, it is clear that she is good at applying female identity to attract more audiences, regarding the female identity as a resource of communication.

2) Expert identity

Expert identity construction in discourse is manifested as giving requirements and suggestions from a professional perspective [3]. Grandma Wu used to be a pediatrician, with rich medical experience. Therefore, when she puts forward some medical proposals, she intentionally constructed her expert identity by adding discourse marker "ah". She takes advantage of the topic marking function of "ah" to remind the audience of her professional background, enhancing the

credibility of her views and gaining the trust of the audience.

In Example 2, at the end of each problem of the newborn, Grandma Wu applied "ah" to mark the topic, emphasizing the professional terms. This speech act enhances the professionalism and authority of the discourse, strengthening the expert identity in the communication. Example 6 is the conclusion reached by Grandma Wu after she conveyed her medical experience to the audience. Grandma Wu asserts that the elderly with strong immune function will not develop into severe case even if they get infected. "Ah" plays the function of attitudinal function to affirm medical knowledge. In the sentence, "Ah" contributes to construct the expert identity of Grandma Wu, letting Grandma Wu's discourse sounds more authoritative, and finally contributes to comforting those who are terrified with omicron.

3) Elder identity

"Ah" also has the function of pausing in the conversation. The elder's minds are not as fast as that of the young, so they need more time to think and organize their words before expressing themselves. As a result, they are likely to fill the time gap with a large number of discourse markers to maintain discourse coherence. Throughout the transcription of Grandma Wu's discourse, the excessive usage of "ah" is the representation of her unconscious construction of the elder identity.

In addition, in China, the elder enjoys a higher social status, so in a conversation, the listener usually unconsciously has a feeling of tension [9]. For reducing the tension of listeners, Grandma Wu choose to exert the mitigation function of "ah" to construct an approachable elder identity. This action contributes to shortening her psychological distance from the audience.

Eg.8 我给大家提点建议，因为这帮子人在我面前就是小弟弟，小妹妹，我比你们早十多年啊。那么有一点体会给大家分享一下啊，大家参考参考吧。

[I would like to offer some advice, because most my fans are younger than me, and are like my younger sisters and brothers. Maybe I was born more than ten years ahead of you <u>ah,</u> so I have some experiences to share with you <u>ah,</u> for reference "ba"]

In Example 8, two "ah" indicates Grandma Wu's age and experience advantages, emphasizing the authority of her opinion, constructing the elder identity. Then at the same time, "ah" are also a tool to mitigate the tone. Therefore, the co-appearance of different functions of "ah" help Grandma Wu construct an easy-going elder identity.

B. Construction of Virtual Identity

In the network context, the expression of individual characteristics of communicators is more flexible. Sometimes, for a certain communicative purpose, communicators can construct their personalized virtual identities [10]. In Example 7, Grandma Wu constructs the virtual peer relationship with the employment of the attitudinal function of discourse markers. At the end of the question "Was I nervous at that time?" she adds "ah" to highlight what has been said and convey the question to the audience, promoting the transmission of emotion in conversation. It is analyzed that the purpose of Grand Wu doing so is to attract a younger audience and win their likes,

as is known that the likes are connected directly to the income. Therefore, as Grandma Wu fully expresses her views, she also tries to retain more fans, especially those who may have a generation gap with her. To narrow their psychological distance, Grandma Wu constructs a virtual peer identity in the videos

Eg.9 不需要你学会看病，但要知道怎样管理自己的健康啊.

[*You don't need to learn how to cure* diseases, *but how to manage your health ah.*]

In Example 9, Grandma Wu persuades the elderly to be good at managing their own health. If "ah" is removed, this sentence will be in imperative mood. In Chinese, "ah" can alleviate the tone, making the words more acceptable to listeners. This kind of speaking implies the equal status and close relationship between the speaker and the audience, constructing a virtual peer identity.

C. Construction of Compound Identity

With the continuous evolution of network communication, the identity of communicators presents the characteristic of multiple identities [10], among which compound identity refers to the identity distinct from ontological identity and virtual identity and has multiple identity functions [11].

Eg.10 良好健康的生活方式就是锻炼呀，吃啊，运动啊，改善睡眠啊，不酗酒啊……年轻时候你可以不在乎，多喝点多抽点啊，现在还是要科学的对待。

[*A good and healthy lifestyle consists of exercising ya, eating ah, exercising ah, sleeping earlier ah, not drinking too much ah…… When you were young, you did not pay attention to your health, drinking and smoking ah, but you need to treat it scientifically now.*]

In Example 10, Grandma Wu constructs three kinds of identities at the same time. First, she builds an expert identity through the topic-marking function of "ah". When talking about the medical problem, she applies "ah" to emphasize the content of the sentence, aiming to draw people's attention to her words. Second, by applying the discourse cohesion function and mitigated function of "ah", Grandma Wu constructs the elder identity. The first four "ah" are used when offering suggestions, which are conducive to mitigating the tone, highlighting the easy-going characteristic of the elderly. Moreover, "ah" appears five times in this sentence, which not only promotes the whole discourse more coherent in the spoken text but also are signs of Grandma Wu's disadvantage of thinking as an old. Third, the last "ah" fail to exert its influence on semantics but the tone. With the application of "ah", Grandma Wu adds intimacy between the words, building a close peer relationship with the audience. All in all, in example 10, Grandma Wu combines the ontological expert identities with the virtual identity and develops a new compound identity in communication, realizing the pragmatic functions of diverse identities at the same time, achieving the best effect of communication.

VI. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of middle-aged and elderly groups gradually integrating into digital life is one of the signs of the healthy development of society. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore the language characteristics of elderly groups on the Internet and the construction of their identities. This paper takes the transcription of Grandma Wu's videos as the corpus, concluding the function of the discourse marker "Ah" in her discourse and exploring the way Grandma Wu constructs pragmatic identities dynamically in communication with the audience. This paper reveals that in Grandma Wu's videos, "ah" mainly realizes two major functions: discourse organization function and interpersonal interaction function, which can be divided into four sub-functions. With the help of these functions, Grandma Wu mainly constructs female identity, expert identity, elder identity, peer identity, and compound identity. The selection and construction of these identities are conducive to narrowing the psychological distance with the audience in different contexts, to receive the audience's recognition and likes.

This study provides enlightenment for the subsequent research on the identity construction of elderly women on the Internet and the function of discourse markers. In addition, Grandma Wu's treatment of sexual identity can provide a reference for other female online users. Gender conflicts can be resolved in a way that reinforces femininity, rather than weakening it through self-stigmatization [12]. Due to the limitation of space, only one Chinese discourse marker is analyzed in this paper. Therefore, in the future, studies can compare different Chinese discourse markers, and analyze them from the perspective of identity construction. Besides, the online identity construction of older males, as well as the relationship between discourse markers and identity construction in other languages are also of great value to research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zhao Yaxuan conducted the research, analyzed the data and wrote the paper while Cui Dan directed and revised the paper; both authors approved the final version.

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