

Exploring Interpersonal Function in College Application Essays

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Abstract—As an academic promotional genre, personal statements play an important role in the admission process. Previous research has focused primarily on personal statements for postgraduate programs and doctoral applications. Few studies have been carried out on college application essays. Based on the theory of interpersonal function of functionalism linguistics, this study analyzes a corpus of 50 successful Ivy League application essays and finds the features of the realization of interpersonal function in college application essays. The findings of this study will be beneficial for prospective applicants in their future endeavors.

Index Terms—Application essay, epistemic attitude, interpersonal function, valuative attitude

I. INTRODUCTION

College application essay is a critical document in the admission process for US colleges and universities. It serves as a personal statement, allowing applicants to showcase their experiences, achievements, abilities, ambitions, values and other aspects of their character and so on to demonstrate what kind of people they are. Research has shown that the personal statement is a decisive factor in the admission process [1]. Previous studies have mainly focused on the generic features of graduate school application personal statements, with limited research conducted on the college application essay [2–4]. With many college applicants having similar academic records, test scores, and extracurricular activities, the application essay often provides an opportunity to differentiate oneself. However, the challenge lies in how to effectively convey one's experiences and thoughts in a manner that sets them apart from others. Past research on graduate school application personal statements has also underscored the significance of interpersonal function in the admission process. Brown found that a focus on research interests was a key factor in successful personal statements [2]. Applely and Applely noted that an unprofessional tone was a common reason for rejection [5]. Li and Deng compared one rejected and three accepted personal statements for postgraduate admission and found that constructing a desired writer identity in the personal statement played a crucial role in the outcome [6, 7]. These findings suggest that interpersonal function is an important aspect worth exploring in personal statements for college admission. Therefore, the current study aims to shed light on the interpersonal features of personal statements in college admissions.

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II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Functionalism Linguistics, interpersonal meta function enacts the personal and social relationships among people. “The clause of the grammar is not only a figure, representing some process—some doing or happening, saying or sensing, being or having—with its various participants and circumstances; it is also a proposition, or a proposal, whereby we inform or question, give an order or make an offer, and express our appraisal of and attitude toward whoever we are addressing and what we are talking about” [8]. Givón summarized two types of signals which indicated the speaker's attitude: epistemic attitude which reflects truth, belief, probability, certainty, and evidence; valuative attitude which reflects desirability, preference, intent, ability, obligation, and manipulation [9]. These signals can directly reflect the speaker's attitude, thus realizing the interpersonal function.

Martin extended the theoretical linguistic framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Martin categorized interpersonal meanings into three systems: attitude, engagement, and graduation. The system of attitude encompasses feelings, including emotional reactions, judgements of behavior, and evaluation of things. Martin specifically defines attitude as comprising “affect”, “judgment” and “appreciation” [10]. “Affect” refers to emotional reactions towards people and things and is classified based on six factors, including the emotions construed as directed towards a specific emotional trigger or as a general ongoing mood [10]. For instance, she likes him or she is pleased with him reflect “affect”. “Appreciation” encompasses evaluations of “things”, as indicated by answering questions such as “did I like it?” [10]. A positive answer implies a feeling of liking someone or something, which is a common emotion. Thus, this study incorporates affection as an element indicating the valuative attitude into the framework.

Interpersonal function can also be realized at the discourse level. Bakhtin stated that the literary language presented “a living mix of varied and opposing voices”, which construed his notion of dialogism and heteroglossia [11]. In the discourse, speakers or writers actually provide a backdrop of various voices in the current communicative context.

In this study, we annotate the grammatical forms of epistemic attitude and valuative attitude as categorized by Givón [9], as well as affection, at the clause level. Beyond the clause, we also utilize Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia to explore how applicants attempt to convey their value positions to the readers through the backdrop of various voices. The framework is illustrated in Table I.

TABLE I: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Epistemic Attitude	Valuative Attitude	Heteroglossia
Truth	Desirability	
Belief	Preference	
Probability	Intent	
Certainty	Ability	
Evidence	Obligation	
	Manipulation	
	Affection	

III. THE STUDY

A. The Corpus

The corpus of this study consists of 50 college application essays admitted to Ivy League schools. The materials are sourced from two books, 50 Successful IVY League Application Essays and College Essays That Made a Difference, as they are currently the most comprehensive reference books containing application documents for Ivy League schools [12, 13]. The selection criterion for the materials is based on the length of the text, and essays with fewer than 350 words are excluded. In the end, 6 of 50 application essays come from Duke University, 6 from MIT, 8 from Stanford University, 7 from Harvard University, 2 from Brown University, 4 from Princeton University, 4 from University of Chicago, 2 from Columbia University, 6 from Yale University, 1 from Cornell University, 1 from Caltech, 3 from University of Pennsylvania, covering topics such as academic passion, career, entrepreneurship, challenges, community service, family, heritage and identity, humor, an influential person, issues, leadership, personal growth, talent, and travel.

B. Methodology

As illustrated in Table II, the length of the corpus ranged from 396 to 993 words, with a median of 540 words. As the examination of interpersonal function was conducted at both the clause level and discourse level, the number of clauses was also counted, ranging from 34 to 110, and a median of 59.5 clauses.

TABLE II: TOTAL WORDS AND AVERAGE LENGTH OF COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS

Range(A)	Median(A)	Range(B)	Median(B)
396–993	540	34–110	59.5

In Table II, Range(A) refers to the range of the length of each college application essay and Median(A) refers to the median of the length of each college application essay; Range(B) refers to the range of the clauses of each college application essay and Median(B) refers to the median of the clauses of each college application essay. This study analyzed essays in the corpus at both the clause level and the discourse level.

At the clause level, the features of interpersonal function were identified through the annotation of grammatical forms, specifically, the parts of speech, as follows:

My strong faith in humanity stems from my witnessing of the best in human qualities... (Essay 11)

This clause reflects the author's epistemic attitude by stating the belief which is expressed by the noun *faith*.

The study also tried to explore the author's voice beyond the words at the discourse level as below:

Rather than make another trip to some lackluster movie theatre on the weekend, I dedicate my time to reading another good book, or reviewing Economics with my friends. (Essay 1)

Here the writer implied that there were several choices for spending the weekend, going to see a movie, reading books, or reviewing Economics with friends. But the writer's attitude was that he preferred reading and reviewing to seeing a movie. And also, the writer strengthened his value position by describing the movie as lackluster. In this way, the author shared his value position with the reader. And in the context of university admission, this would be a favorable value position.

In this study, two raters annotated the interpersonal function of each essay separately, and then checked together, and re-examined if there were disagreements until they agreed with each other.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Findings

Table III below shows the frequency of epistemic attitude, valuative attitude, and heteroglossia respectively. There are altogether 3106 clauses in the corpus of 50 college application essays. At the clause level, the clause is taken as analyzing unit. 279 expressions of epistemic attitude have been found. 459 expressions of valuative attitude have been found. At the discourse level, there are altogether 5 instances of heteroglossia.

TABLE III: FREQUENCY OF EPISTEMIC ATTITUDE, VALUATIVE ATTITUDE, AND HETEROGLOSSIA

Epistemic Attitude	Valuative Attitude	Heteroglossia
279	459	5

The frequency of valuative attitude is much higher than that of epistemic attitude, which indicates that the successful application essays to the top universities in the U.S. roughly tend to express more valuative attitude than epistemic attitude. And the frequency of heteroglossia has plummeted. In the corpus of 50 college application essays, there are only 5 expressions of heteroglossia, found in Essay 1, 4, 5, 14, and 25 respectively. The expressions of heteroglossia can condense more information in the discourse, for example:

Instead of seeing movies with friends on weekends, I work hard and attempt to keep the little kids out of my mom's hair. That's Brooklyn. (Essay 14)

The writer aimed to emphasize his or her resolution and passion for the academic pursuits by highlighting the distinctive living environment in Brooklyn. While the writer's peers typically engage in recreational activities on weekends, even when they remain at home, they likely have the responsibility of caring for younger siblings. Nonetheless, in this genre, writers prefer to express their attitude and values directly.

So, the following discusses the realization of epistemic attitude and valuative attitude in detail.

B. Epistemic Attitude

In this study, the second frequent expression concerning interpersonal function is that of epistemic attitude. Among the total 279 expressions of epistemic attitude, there are 39 expressions of truth, 24 expressions of belief, 153 expressions of probability, 46 expressions of certainty, and 17 expressions of evidence. Table IV shows the realization of epistemic attitude.

TABLE IV: REALIZATION OF EPISTEMIC ATTITUDE

Truth	Belief	Probability	Certainty	Evidence
39	24	153	46	17

The expressions of probability account for over half of the expressions used to convey epistemic attitude. Writers tend to adopt a tone of probability in their narration. For example, when narrating his research experience, the writer said “*this ‘organ printing’ approach could potentially address problems of...*” (Essay 5). When the writer expressed his resolution to pursue a career in public health, he wrote “even if this problem **can** never completely be solved, *I want to help remedy this as much as possible.*” (Essay 11). In the college application essays, many writers like to describe the experience to try new things or the experience to challenge themselves. They still prefer the tone of probability such as “*how the seniors would respond to my performance*” (Essay 15), “*how it would touch my life and lives of others*” (Essay 16), “*I may not be the only in need, I would be most profoundly affected*” (Essay 23). This tone of probability suggests that the writers are not entirely arbitrary, to some extent leaving an impression of credibility. As for the grammatical forms to realize epistemic attitudes, the probability is mainly realized through modal verbs which appear altogether 126 times in the corpus as shown in Appendix. And there are still adjectives, adverbs, and nouns to realize probability which are 12 times, 11 times, and 4 times respectively.

Besides probability, certainty and truth are the main expressions to realize epistemic attitude which appear 46 times and 39 times respectively. In grammatical forms, certainty is mostly expressed in the form of adverbs such as *certainly, absolutely, undoubtedly, assuredly, exactly, definitely, firmly, and incredibly* appearing altogether 16 times. And in turn, verbs, adjectives, modal verbs, and nouns appear 12 times, 12 times, 4 times, and twice respectively. Among the verbs, besides such verbs as *assure* and *confirm*, the emphatic word *do* appears 9 times to add emphasis to the affirmative expression. Truth is ranked third in the realization of epistemic attitude. It is mainly expressed by nouns, adverbs, and adjectives, which appear 16 times, 14 times, and 9 times respectively.

Belief and evidence are the less realization of epistemic attitude comparatively. Both are expressed in only two grammatical forms, verb and noun, with 17 times verbs and 7 times nouns expressing belief and 14 times verbs and 3 times nouns expressing evidence.

C. Valuative Attitude

Table V shows the realization of valuative attitude. There are 138 expressions of desirability, 2 expressions of preference, 28 expressions of intent, 169 expressions of

ability, 72 expressions of obligation, and 50 expressions of affection. And there is no expression of manipulation.

TABLE V: REALIZATION OF VALUATIVE ATTITUDE (A)

Desirability	Preference	Intent	Ability
138	2	28	169

TABLE V: REALIZATION OF VALUATIVE ATTITUDE(B)

Obligation	Manipulation	Affection
72	0	50

Ability and desirability are the attitudes that the writers want to express most. The writers tend to try to emphasize their competency in all kinds of ways, such as “*I am often amazed by the calculations I am able to do*” (Essay 2), “*there are no words that can describe how proud and greatly accomplished I feel today at my ability to speak Spanish*” (Essay 3), and “*I must remember that every problem has a solution and I can find it*” (Essay 8). And also, the writers like to express their desires clearly and directly, for example, “*I desire to join others with similar talent and passion at Duke*” (Essay 35). In grammatical forms, most of the ability is expressed by modal verbs, 113 times, while desirability is mostly expressed by verbs, 64 times. The second most common expressions of ability are adjectives which appear sharply down to 39 times while the second most common expressions of desirability are not very far behind verbs. They are modal verbs which appear 55 times. Besides, ability has still been expressed by nouns, 16 times, and verb once. And desirability has still been expressed by nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, 12 times, 4 times, and 3 times respectively.

Obligation is ranked third to realize valuative attitude, which is mostly expressed by verbs, 47 times and modal verbs, 22 times, adjectives as well, 3 times. There’s no manipulation used to realize valuative attitude, which implies that the writers in such a genre prefer to express their attitude positively. In the realization of valuative attitude, preference is a small proportion, with only two expressions, one verb, and one noun.

In this genre, it is prominent that the writers are willing to express their affection toward some subject or some studying field which is the added item in the framework of this study, such as “*my love for science stems largely from this*” (Essay 4), “*I..... love arriving to school each day with the prospect of.....*” (Essay 1) The expressions of affection appear 50 times altogether which are mainly verbs and nouns, 26 times and 17 times respectively, as well as adjectives appearing 6 times and one adverb in the corpus.

V. CONCLUSION

From this study, it can be seen that the writers of admitted college application essays prefer to express their attitude directly rather than by heteroglossia. And they would also prefer to express their valuative attitude rather than epistemic attitude. The inclination of the items of the epistemic and valuative attitude together is in descending order according to ability, probability, desirability, obligation, affection, certainty, truth, intent, belief, evidence, preference, and manipulation. It can be seen that in college application essays, the writers are more willing to express their abilities and

obligation, and in a non-arbitrary way. In terms of the statistics about the manipulation in this study, it can be inferred that when writing the application essay, the writers had better avoid narrating the experience or expressing attitudes negatively.

In the grammatical forms, the modal verbs are the most important choice to realize interpersonal function in such a genre. It is confirmed in this study that besides modal verbs, other grammatical forms like verbs, adjectives, nouns, and adverbs all play roles in realizing interpersonal function in the genre. And as shown in the study, verbs, standing more than a third of the proportion of the means, are used to realize the writers' epistemic and valuative attitude.

This study has mainly focused on the realization of interpersonal function through parts of speech. Further study is still needed to carry out on the level of grammatical metaphors.

APPENDIX

TABLE A1: THE DISTRIBUTION OF PARTS OF SPEECH IN THE REALIZATION OF EPISTEMIC ATTITUDE AND VALUATIVE ATTITUDE

		Verb	Noun	Adjective	Adverb	Modal Verb	Total
Epistemic Attitude	Truth	-	16	9	14	-	39
	Belief	17	7	-	-	-	24
	Probability	-	4	12	11	126	153
	Certainty	12	2	12	16	4	46
	Evidence	14	3	-	-	-	17
	Total	43	32	33	41	130	279
Valuative Attitude	Desirability	64	12	4	3	55	138
	Preference	1	1	-	-	-	2
	Intent	25	2	-	-	1	28
	Ability	1	16	39	-	113	169
	Obligation	47	-	3	-	22	72
	Manipulation	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Affection	26	17	6	1	-	50
	Total	164	48	52	4	191	459
	Total	207	80	85	45	321	738

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Qi Li conceived the study, collected the data, performed the analysis as one of the raters, and drafted the paper. Dongmei Ge performed the analysis as one of the raters and revised the paper. Both authors had approved the final version.

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