

Subjectivity and Pragmatic Strategies in Elderly Rights-Protection Discourse

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Abstract

Taking elderly rights-protection discourse on online platforms, this study examines its subjectivity and pragmatic strategies from the perspectives of pragmatics and discourse analysis. The findings reveal that the connotations of the subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse are mainly manifested in emotional appeals, attitude expressions and cognitive judgments. These are presented and encoded through pragmatic strategies at lexical, syntactic, and textual levels, including lexical strategies such as negative vocabulary, concrete vocabulary, and vague vocabulary, syntactic strategies such as mood and discourse markers, and textual strategies like hardship narratives. The research uncovers the underlying subjective tendency and pragmatic patterns in elderly rights discourse, providing valuable references for the studies of aging discourse and discourse analysis and contributing to a deeper pragmatic understanding of the subjectivity embedded in elderly rights protection discourse.

Keywords: elderly rights-protection discourse, subjectivity, discourse subjectivity, pragmatic strategies, rights defending, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of the accelerating aging process in Chinese society, the protection of the rights and interests of the elderly has become an important issue. Academia has also begun to pay attention to the discourse through which the elderly express their demands and safeguard their rights, i.e., elderly rights-protection discourse, including its linguistic features and pragmatic functions. Huang and Jiao (2022) conducted a macro-analysis of the discourse characteristics and social rights defense behaviors of the elderly and suggested directions for future research (Huang & Jiao, 2022). However, systematic exploration of the encoding of subjectivity within rights-protection discourse and its pragmatic mechanisms remains relatively scarce.

In elderly rights-protection discourse, the emotional appeals, value judgments, and interactive strategies employed by the elderly when their rights are infringed upon carry a distinct subjective coloring, i.e., subjectivity. Discourse subjectivity is the self-orientation conveyed by language users in discourse, encompassing their stance, attitude, and emotions (Shen, 2001). The subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse not only reflects the subjective intentions of the rights defenders but is also closely related to social pragmatics. Peng and Zhang (2023) pointed out that strategies such as public condemnation and face maintenance can realize the functions of elderly rights-defense constructions (Peng & Zhang, 2023). However, existing research on the subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse is insufficient, and a systematic analysis of its pragmatic strategies is lacking.

This paper selects elderly rights-protection discourse as the research object, integrates relevant theoretical frameworks such as subjectivity and discourse analysis, and focuses on two core questions: (1) What are the

main manifestations of subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse? (2) What pragmatic strategies are employed in expressing this subjectivity?

2. Theoretical Foundation

Discourse subjectivity refers to the speaker's/writer's subjective attitudes, emotions, and viewpoints expressed in discourse, which can be presented through means such as lexical choice, syntactic structures, and textual organization. Discourse subjectivity is one of the important drivers of language evolution (Traugott, 1989); subjectivity involves the speaker's cognition and evaluation of reality (Langacker, 1990); discourse subjectivity is realized through the adaptive mechanisms of language, reflecting the speaker's choices and adjustments in specific contexts (Verschuere, 1999); Zhao (2022) established a hierarchical system model for discourse subjectivity, containing four levels: positioning, stance, attitude, and emotion (Zhao, 2022). However, existing research mostly focuses on theoretical discussions, lacking studies on the subjectivity in the discourse of specific social groups such as the elderly. Research on elderly rights-protection discourse presents an interdisciplinary trend. The field of sociology often focuses on the structural motivations of rights-defense actions (Liu 2010); legal studies emphasize the interaction between rights-protection discourse and legal procedures (Chang & Yu, 2018); while linguistic perspectives mostly analyze the rhetorical features and pragmatic functions of discourse.

In summary, existing research on discourse subjectivity provides an important theoretical framework for this study, and research on elderly rights-protection discourse offers perspectives for analyzing its discourse practices. However, existing studies seldom focus on the subjectivity behind elderly rights-protection discourse, and research on discourse subjectivity is mostly from a cognitive perspective, lacking related studies from a pragmatic viewpoint. Given that elderly rights-protection discourse on online platforms is more public and accessible, this paper takes online elderly rights-protection discourse as its research object to examine its subjectivity and pragmatic strategies. It aims to reveal the subjective intentions—such as appeals, emotions, attitudes, and viewpoints—encoded by the elderly in rights-defense events, and their pragmatic realization strategies at lexical, syntactic, and textual levels, thereby providing a research perspective for the analysis of elderly rights-protection discourse and offering some linguistic references for social governance and the protection of elderly rights.

3. Corpus Definition and Sources

Elderly rights-protection discourse refers to the discourse used by natural persons aged 60 and above through channels such as offline and online platforms in the process of safeguarding their legitimate rights and interests. Accordingly, we searched on online platforms like Douyin (TikTok), Tencent Video, and Bilibili using keywords such as “老” (old), “老人” (old person), “老伯” (old uncle), “老汉” (old man), and “阿婆” (grandma). We manually extracted videos related to elderly rights protection and transcribed them into text to serve as the research corpus.

4. The Connotations of Subjectivity in Elderly Rights-Protection Discourse

We found that the connotations of subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse are mainly manifested in three dimensions: emotional appeals, attitude expression, and cognitive judgment. Their core function is to strengthen the legitimacy and urgency of rights-protection appeals through linguistic expression, thereby influencing the emotional identification and value judgment of the audience/listeners and better seeking external help, etc. The elderly use specific linguistic forms to transform personal subjective experiences into the social mobilizing force of rights-defense actions, forming rights-protection discourse with characteristics of elderly discourse. Below, we will explore these three types of subjective connotations separately.

4.1 Emotional Appeals

Emotional appeal is one of the most prominent connotations of subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse. Since the elderly are often in a socially vulnerable position, their rights-protection discourse commonly employs expressions such as grievance, complaint, and lamentation, aiming to arouse sympathy and empathy from the audience/listeners to enhance the discourse's impact. For example:

- (1) 有罪人黑保护逍遥法外，无罪人被判刑 15 年，家破人亡，告状无门，无奈在抖音上求助公平正义。(The guilty are at large under black protection, the innocent are sentenced to 15 years, with family ruined and lives lost, no avenue for appeal, helplessly seeking fairness and justice on Douyin.) (Douyin 2023-07-03)
- (2) 希望广大网友和有关部门帮助我除恶务尽，深挖彻查，还我公道，我们全家跪谢！(I hope the broad netizens and relevant departments can help me eradicate the evil completely, investigate thoroughly, restore my justice, our whole family kneels in thanks!) (Bilibili 2022-06-12)

The emotional expressions in the above examples of elderly rights-protection discourse not only strengthen the identity of the elderly as victims but also, through impactful language, stimulate the audience's/listeners' sympathy and moral support, constructing a “moving through emotion” rights-defense strategy with a significant

tendency towards pathos. In these discourses, emotional appeal is not merely a natural outpouring of emotion, but a discursive act subjectively selected and organized by the rights defender, possessing clear subjective intentions and strategic purposes, such as garnering attention through tragic narratives and seeking public support.

4.2 Attitude Expression

Attitude expression is an important way for the elderly to reinforce their stance and value judgments in rights-protection discourse. Through direct or indirect attitudinal discourse, the elderly convey evaluations of events, establish moral boundaries between right and wrong, and construct a discursive schema opposing “legitimate demands” and “illegal actions.” For example:

(3) 看见这些东西我就想哭，睁开眼我都不想活着了……从开始到最后一共花了 96 万多。(Seeing these things makes me want to cry, I don’t even want to live when I open my eyes... from start to finish, it cost over 960,000 yuan in total.) (Douyin 2021-12-09)

(4) 开发商指使多人持钢管狂殴将我四肢全部打断，隔日凌晨又烧毁我家汽车……我们全家跪谢！(The developer instructed multiple people to violently beat me with steel pipes, breaking all my limbs, and burned my family’s car in the early morning of the next day... our whole family kneels in thanks!) (Kuaishou 2022-06-13)

The above examples exhibit obvious evaluative subjectivity, strengthening value judgments and moral positioning of events through emotionally charged language expressions. In Example (3), “想哭” (want to cry) and “不想活” (don’t even want to live) are typical emotional attitude markers, conveying the rights defender’s strong negative attitude towards the fraudulent behavior. The juxtaposition of emotional expression with economic data (“96 万多” over 960,000 yuan) creates a mutual reinforcement of facts and attitude. Example (4) vividly depicts the violent acts of the perpetrators through negative and violent verbs like “狂殴” (violently beat) and “烧毁” (burned), establishing the certainty of “evil.” Meanwhile, “跪谢” (kneel in thanks) presents the rights defender’s helplessness and distress in a humble posture, further stimulating the audience’s/listeners’ emotional identification and narrowing the psychological distance between them.

4.3 Cognitive Judgment

Beyond emotion and attitude, the elderly also express their cognitive judgments about events through discourse, i.e., subjective judgments regarding the development of situations, behavioral motives, causal relationships, etc. Cognitive judgments are often realized through modal words, speculative sentences, logical connectors, etc., reflecting a degree of rational thinking and subjective judgment, possessing distinct subjective characteristics.

(5) 我叫 XXX，今日实名举报 XX 区 XX 局退休职工 XXX，举报事实为对本人进行合同诈骗，时间之长、数额之大、手段之恶劣。(My name is XXX, today I am reporting in my real name XXX, a retired employee of the XX District XX Bureau, for contract fraud against me, with its long duration, large amount, and despicable methods.) (Anonymized here and below) (Douyin 2023-02-09)

(6) 我叫 XXX，家住 XX 市 XX 区。我实名举报 XXX 医院谋财害命，有组织有预谋的针对老年患者实施了惨无人道、灭绝人性的犯罪。(My name is XXX, living in XX District, XX City. I am reporting in my real name XXX Hospital for murder for profit, committing cruel, inhuman, and genocidal crimes against elderly patients in an organized and premeditated manner.) (Douyin 2023-4-7)

The above examples of elderly rights-protection discourse clearly demonstrate how rights defenders construct subjective cognitive judgments through language. In terms of sentence structure, the rights defenders use constructions like “我叫……” (My name is...) and “我叫……(我) 实名举报……” (My name is... I am reporting in my real name...), establishing a clear first-person narrative perspective that reinforces their judgmental stance. In content organization, the rights defenders not only directly identify the perpetrators and their actions (e.g., “合同诈骗” contract fraud, “谋财害命” murder for profit) but also, through listing facts—such as “对本人进行合同诈骗……手段之恶劣” (contract fraud against me... with... despicable methods) in Example (5) and “谋财害命……灭绝人性的犯罪” (murder for profit... genocidal crimes) in Example (6)—transform event narration into a reasoning chain with subjective judgment coloring, thereby enhancing the persuasiveness and legitimacy of their rights-protection discourse.

5. Pragmatic Strategies of Subjectivity in Elderly Rights-Protection Discourse

The pragmatic strategies of subjectivity in elderly rights-protection discourse encompass lexical, syntactic, and textual levels. Rights defenders employ these strategies to express their dissatisfaction and accusations, transforming personal injustices into public issues to seek public understanding, support, identification, and legal attention.

5.1 Lexical Strategies

We found that the elderly in their rights-protection discourse tend to use negative vocabulary, concrete

vocabulary, vague vocabulary, etc., to present their specific subjective tendencies. Among these, negative vocabulary serves not only as a means of emotional expression but also as a crucial pragmatic strategy for conveying subjectivity and expressing stance in elderly rights-protection discourse.

(7) 办的手续都是中介和房管局工作人员办的, 杨某是买方, 办完手续以后, 张某得了 279911 元, 那这钱以后蹿了, 远走高飞不见了。(All the procedures were handled by the intermediary and housing authority staff. Yang was the buyer. After the procedures were completed, Zhang received 279,911 yuan. Then this money later scurried away, fled far and high, disappeared.) (Tencent Video 2018-08-15)

In Example (7), “蹿了” (scurried away) and “远走高飞” (fled far and high) carry clear negative connotations, implying the other party’s evasion of responsibility and malicious appropriation. This not only expresses the rights defender’s anger over the financial loss but also constructs an image of an ‘other’ who evades the law and betrays morality, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of the rights defender.

The elderly also tend to use concrete vocabulary during the rights-defense process to vividly recount unjust events or experiences, express their appeals, and reinforce the pain caused by physical harm. For example:

(8) 2007 年, 响应政府号召, 我们村迎来了拆迁, 在交房过程中, 因商铺建筑未按拆迁协议履行产生分歧。直到现在, 商铺未能交房。(In 2007, responding to the government’s call, our village underwent demolition. During the handover process, disagreements arose because the commercial building construction did not comply with the demolition agreement. Until now, the commercial building has not been handed over.) (Bilibili 2022-06-12)

In Example (8), the rights defender uses concrete vocabulary like “拆迁” (demolition), “交房” (handover), and “商铺” (commercial building) to clearly describe the specific context of the event, enhancing the credibility of their discourse and making it easier for the audience/listeners to understand and sympathize with their plight.

Furthermore, a significant amount of vague vocabulary exists in elderly rights-protection discourse. Through vague expressions, rights defenders can not only showcase the complexity, contradictoriness, and multidimensionality of their emotions but also create flexible coping space and exoneration space for themselves. This serves as an important pragmatic strategy for expressing uncertainty, helplessness, and the expectation of receiving help. For example:

(9) 我实名举报 XX 市 XX 法院不作为乱作为, 导致我保全的 2000 多万元工程款被非法转移, 目前我们民工工资和材料款无法支付。(I am reporting in my real name the XX Court of XX City for nonfeasance and malfeasance, resulting in the illegal transfer of over 20 million yuan of project funds under my preservation. Currently, our migrant workers’ wages and material costs cannot be paid.) (Douyin 2023-7-8)

In Example (9), “不作为” (nonfeasance) and “乱作为” (malfeasance) lack precise action definitions, and their meaning and scope are uncertain, belonging to vague verbs. Using such vague expressions to accuse behavior allows the rights defender, on one hand, to avoid precise legal accusations and, on the other hand, to effectively convey negative emotions towards unjust actions. Through this indirect approach, the rights defender subtly expresses the possible existence of wrongdoing, hoping to gain attention from the outside or relevant departments. Additionally, the vague quantifier “2000 多万元” (over 20 million yuan), while seemingly lacking precision and not specifying an exact figure, actually amplifies the severity of the rights defender’s ordeal. To some extent, these vague words exaggerate the extent of victimization, aligning with the expression pattern of subjective large quantities (Chu, 2011).

5.2 Syntactic Strategies

Syntactic strategies such as mood and discourse markers in elderly rights-protection discourse not only convey rights-defense information but also present the rights defender’s subjective tendencies—emotions, stance, cognition, and judgment—regarding the rights-defense event. As important markers of subjectivity, these syntactic strategies help rights defenders highlight the legitimacy of their own situation and appeals, stimulate emotional identification from the audience/listeners, and thereby prompt judicial institutions, government departments, and the public to pay more attention and respond to their demands. In rights-protection discourse, besides declarative mood, the elderly frequently use exclamatory and interrogative moods to express strong emotions.

(10) 我强烈呼吁上级主管部门派督导组进驻 XX 司法系统, 以我们这个案为突破口, 彻查 XX 市、区两级黑保护伞, 还 XX 人民一个公平正义朗朗的法制环境, 谢谢! (I strongly urge the superior authorities to send an inspection team into the XX judicial system, using our case as a breakthrough point, thoroughly investigating the black protective umbrellas at the municipal and district levels in XX, and restoring a fair, just, and bright legal environment for the people of XX. Thank you!) (Bilibili 2022-06-15)

In rights-defense expressions, the use of specific mood types often carries deep-seated appeals beyond literal meaning. The exclamatory mood “强烈呼吁” (strongly urge) in Example (10) actually highlights the rights

defender's urgent expectation for problem resolution while also conveying their dissatisfaction and concern about unfair conditions in society.

Furthermore, in the discourse expressions of the elderly defending their rights, discourse markers such as “我觉得” (I feel/think), “我认为” (I believe), “你看” (you see), “您发现了没” (have you noticed), “其实” (actually), and “实际上” (in fact) play important roles. These expressions serve multiple functions: they can effectively focus the audience's/listeners' attention and clearly convey the rights defender's personal views, attitudes, stance, emotions, and other subjective tendencies. For example:

(11) 他说让这个原老板房东和皇领会的官司打完，等到皇领会的老板拿到钱以后，胜诉了再退回给我们钱，我觉得这个做法很荒唐的。(He said to let the lawsuit between the original boss landlord and Huang Ling Hui finish, wait until Huang Ling Hui's boss gets the money, and after winning the lawsuit, then return the money to us. I feel this approach is very absurd.) (Bilibili 2021-08-19)

In elderly rights-protection discourse, specific discourse markers also serve as markers of subjectivity, carrying different subjective intentions of the rights defender. The discourse marker “我觉得” (I feel) in Example (11) indicates that the rights defender's evaluation of the event is based on their own perception and judgment, carrying a strong subjective coloring.

5.3 Textual Strategies

Elderly rights-protection discourse primarily presents its subjectivity through the textual strategy of hardship narratives. Hardship narrative unfolds the victim's experience along a timeline, combined with detailed descriptions, to enhance the authenticity of the discourse and empathy with the audience/listeners. This narrative typically follows the chronological order of events, focusing on the entire process from the occurrence of the conflict to its outcome. Through specific details, it intensifies the harm caused to the rights defender by the event and the various difficulties encountered during the rights-defense process, allowing the audience/listeners to perceive the injustice faced, arouse their sympathy, and seek help. For example:

(12) ……睡到大概 5 点左右，我就要爬起来了，早上大概 6 点电梯就比较频繁了。突然发现这个电梯噪音以后，我马上自己再换了一扇门，隔音门，隔音门换了以后，我感觉还不太行，我马上又买了隔音棉贴好，也没效果。我马上又买了一扇门，还是解决不了问题……你们也要为我想想，我一把年纪了，我住在这里，这个环境能好好生活吗？…… (... Around 5 a.m., I have to get up. By about 6 in the morning, the elevator is already running quite frequently. After suddenly becoming aware of this elevator noise, I immediately replaced my own door with a soundproof one. But even after changing to a soundproof door, I still didn't feel it was sufficient. Right away, I bought soundproofing foam and applied it, but that didn't work either. I then immediately bought another door, and yet the problem still couldn't be resolved... You have to consider my situation too—at my age, living here in these conditions, how can I possibly live a decent life...) (Bilibili 2021-12-28)

In Example (12), the rights defender specifically describes the disturbance caused by the elevator noise. The series of attempts and failures in the text reveals not only the effort the rights defender expended trying to solve the problem and the long-term nature of the noise issue but also conveys their sense of helplessness and frustration. The phrase “我一把年纪了” (at my age) further highlights the rights defender's vulnerability, distress, and helplessness. These details deepen the audience's/listeners' emotional identification, making them more understanding and supportive of the rights defender's appeal.

It is evident that through hardship narratives, rights defenders can clearly present the difficult situations and painful experiences they face. Descriptions following a timeline and with concrete details create an emotional atmosphere, making it easier for the audience/listeners to resonate, thereby arousing their sympathy and support.

6. Conclusion

The discourse used by the elderly in the process of safeguarding their own rights and interests is both discourse practice with subjective tendencies and pragmatic functions. Its subjectivity is primarily manifested as emotional appeals, attitude expression, and cognitive judgments regarding rights-defense events. This study not only contributes to a deeper pragmatic understanding of the subjectivity behind elderly rights-protection discourse but can also provide theoretical support for promoting social fairness and justice from a linguistic perspective and practical insights for optimizing public communication. Future research could further expand corpus sources, explore multimodal expressions of elderly rights-protection discourse and their subjectivity in different cultural contexts, enriching research in areas such as discourse subjectivity and discourse analysis.

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