Abstract

Modality, according to Lyons (1977) and Palmer (2001), has commonly been associated with a speaker’s subjective attitudes and emotions. Interjections are primordially related to emotional states and have an integral modality function. However, previous studies place more emphasis on syntactic and pragmatic functions of interjections, neglecting the essence of modality.

This paper attempts to analyse the modality functions of interjections found in Singapore Mandarin Conversations. The study is primarily based on a spoken corpus of live recordings collected from 22 Secondary School Students, which amounts up to 116 minutes of actual spoken discourses. With reference to theoretical frameworks of Hu Mingyang (1981) and Jovanović (2004), the modality system of interjections in Singapore Mandarin can be classified into 10 functions: 4 types of attitudes (hesistance, approval, disapproval, euphemism) and 6 types of emotions (comprehension, annoyance, surprise, sadness, praise, joy). Singaporeans most frequently express hesistance and comprehension, accounting 50% and 34% of interjections in attitude and emotion categories respectively. High occurrence of hesistance
reveals the indecisive nature of Singaporeans; frequent conveyance of comprehension depicts rich exchange of thoughts in communication. Joy, being the least expressed emotion, mirrors Singapore as a stressful society. The study also discovers that Singapore Mandarin is subjected to influences from English and Hokkien Dialect, with them accounting 19% and 12% of total interjections respectively.

In addition to the analysis, it is of great realistic significance to study the manifestation of gender differences in the use of interjections. Results show that males and females on average, speak 10.4 and 19.1 times of interjections respectively. Females speak a greater number of interjections than males, portraying their expressiveness of personal emotions. Males and females feature different choice of interjections and exemplify different modality functions of interjections. In the attitude category, females display a higher proportion of opinions than males. In the emotion category, females are more expressive in comprehension, annoyance, sadness, praise and joy than males, while males exhibit more surprises than females.

Finally, the paper highlights the shortcomings of current teaching methods of interjections and makes recommendations. It is
deemed more effective to teach interjections of different frequency at different learning stages. The research reveals that Singapore Mandarin has 13 high frequency interjections suited for initial learners; 30 medium and low frequency interjections suited for advanced learners. It is also essential to note that an interjection of the same tone or different tones may possess a variety of modality functions in different situational contexts.

Overall, this study seeks to gain an in-depth understanding of the modality functions of interjections and serves as a valuable resource for future modality research in Singapore Mandarin.