Doctoral Dissertation

Interactional Explanation:
A Pragmatic Perspective

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Summary of Research Background, Working Definition and Research Questions

The present dissertation explores an important albeit understudied pragmatic phenomenon, *interactional explanation*. Despite a body of research dedicated to *explanation* across various academic disciplines, little attention has been given to this phenomenon in pragmatics and interaction studies. The aim of the current research is to pin down this phenomenon and to establish a reliable and replicable analytic scheme.

In the dissertation, I provide a comprehensive investigation of interactional explanation. I employ a mixed methods approach in the exploration that combines both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' methodologies. This comprehensive approach allows for a thorough examination of diverse types of data. Building upon the findings from multiple studies, I propose a replicable research model of *interactional explanation.* Overall, the dissertation not only presents a working definition of *interactional explanation*, but also provides empirical evidence and a replicable research model to analyse this pragmatic phenomenon.

Research background

The question over what statement or account qualifies as a piece of (good) explanation yields much research from various academic disciplines, such as philosophy of science, social psychology and sociology, etc.

Literature on explanation

In the field of philosophy of science, *correctness* is the principal focus of the explanation studies. Modern research into the scientific explanation started with the Deductive—Nomological model (DN model) by Hempel & Oppenheim (1948). Following the DN model, Wesley Salmon (1971, 1994) proposed the statistical relevance model (later developed into Causal Mechanical model) which claims that the explanatory relevance lies in the statistical relevance. While the majority of works on scientific explanation have centred on establishing the ultimate truth-conditions of (scientific) explanation, van Fraassen (1980) challenged the prevailing objectivity stance. He questioned the objectivity approach to exploring explanations by claiming that an explanation is *"a three-term relation between theory, fact, and context"*(p. 159). Following van Fraassen's pragmatic approach, Achinstein (1983, 2010) proposed an illocutionary theory of explanation. Achinstein differentiated the act of explaining and the "product" of the explaining act. Another notable contribution to the field was made by von Wright in 1971, who proposed an intentionalist model. von Wright (1971) suggested that

human action had to be understood in a social and cultural context (p. 111). However, among the immense literature of scientific explanation, there is a scarcity of works focusing on the application of explanation theory. The theory of scientific explanation is generally assumed to establish an ideal model of explanation that is deemed to be substantially consistent with explanations in non-scientific contexts.

Seeking explanation does not only form the ultimate purpose of philosophy of science but also constitutes a fundamental way of life. Research and theorisation attempt on explanation could also be traced back to the research in common-sense psychology (Heider, 1958), where causal attribution illuminates the rational process of explanation. Building upon Heider's work, leading social psychologists such as Kelley and Weiner further developed *Attribution theory*. Weiner's (1974, 2018) *three-dimensional model* of attribution provides a series of systematic and specific attribution criteria, which can be easily applied into discourse analysis. However, Weiner (1985) acknowledged that attributional studies mainly employed highly contextualised experimentation in achievement-related settings. Thus, authentic interaction observation has been rather scarce. Recognising this limitation, social psychologist Antaki and his colleagues (Vayreda & Antaki 1991; Antaki & Leudar, 1992) argued that ordinary conversations contained much explaining, which could not be well captured by an account. Antaki and his colleagues analysed explanations in ordinary conversations and considered *explanation* as claim-backing, a type of conversation moves (Antaki & Leudar, 1990).

The present work on *interactional explanation* is also related to the sociological concept of *accountability*. Accountability refers to the 'intelligibility' of the conduct, which means that what a person is doing is intelligible and so the conduct is accountable. Explanation is intelligible/accountable, similar to all other conducts. However, research on *interactional explanation* has a different focus than the intelligibility of the conduct. Compared to the studies in the intelligible sense of sociological accountability, the concept of account is closer to *interactional explanation*. Erving Goffman (1971) regarded an *account* as one of the three types of remedial interchange, together with apology and request. According to Goffman, a good account is the one that "succeeds in restructuring the initial response of the offended and appreciably reducing the fault of the actor."(p.112) Scott and Lyman (1968, p.46) defined accounts as the "statements made to explain untoward behaviour and bridge the gap between actions and expectations. The honouring of an account represents the "restoration of equilibrium." However, the concept of *account* emphasises the normative implications of practices and actions in social interaction. The pragmatic concept of *interactional explanation*

is concerned with information appeal in interaction rather than a situation requiring remedial exchange or a moral responsibility derived from normative social encounter.

In pragmatic research, explanatory expressions have usually been involved in the studies of speech acts realisation. Following Edmondson & House (1981), the CCSARP project (Blum-Kulka et al.,1989) proposed explanation or account as an important supportive move of making request and apology. Since then, many researchers recognised explanation as a linguistic realisation strategy in speech acts of request and apology across different linguacultures. However, most speech act studies reported the presence of explanation in the speech acts performance, but few studies focused on the strategy *per se*. Explanation has been endowed as a general and rudimentary mode of learning and experiencing. Thus, explanatory utterances are usually taken as postulates for the perception and appreciation of those relevant interactional phenomena. Nevertheless, many key questions about this pragmatic phenomenon remain unanswered. For example, what could be counted as a (good) explanation (grounder) for request? What factors determine the efficacy of an explanation? Does the use of explanation correlate with the effectiveness of the speech act? Against this background, the present research aspires to investigate this particular pragmatic phenomenon—*interactional explanation*.

Significance of the research

Interactional explanation is a highly prevalent pragmatic phenomenon that spans across various types of discourse. *Interactional explanation* communicates more than a simple informative message. It may become a cause of suspicion or even irritation. It might even bring a pragmatic failure that results in a breakdown in interaction. The research of *interactional explanation* inherently falls within pragmatics. To the best of my knowledge, there is a dearth of systematic research focusing on the dynamics and capacity of explanatory expressions in pragmatics and interaction studies.

To address this gap, I conducted a systematic investigation of *interactional explanation* and develop a replicable research model to analyse and understand this pragmatic phenomenon effectively. The research of *interactional explanation* contributes to the existing literature on speech acts, especially those involving explanation as a realisation strategy. Moreover, interactional explanations offer a diverse range of information, potentially highlighting different prominent aspects of the information stressed in various types of interactions across different linguacultures. This aspect presents an intriguing focus for contrastive studies in pragmatics. Combined with the interaction ritual theory, it could shed light on other aspects of pragmatic research, enriching our understanding of interaction. All in all, the research of this

interactional explanation provides a new perspective that broadens the understanding of the dynamics of human interaction.

Working definition

My working definition of **interactional explanation** is *a response to the perceived information[1] appeal from the interaction*. This interactional phenomenon encompasses the explanatory utterances that could involve diverse types of information based on perceived information appeal in interactions. *Interactional explanation* communicates more than a simple declarative message. Irrespective of the purpose or function it serves in interaction, *interactional explanation* is pragmatically sought, provided, interpreted, and evaluated in the real time of the interaction.

Research questions

To understand the pragmatics of interactional explanation, it is essential to build a viable research model of this specific discursive phenomenon. Consequently, the overarching research question of the current research project is:

> *How can diverse interactional explanations be modelled from a pragmatic standpoint*?

In order to solve this overarching research question and construct a replicable research model, I address the following specific queries that are directly related to the essential aspects of *interactional explanation:*

1) *Do interactional explanations bear any linguistic features and/or patterns?*
2) *What is the relationship between interactional explanation and the performance of the speech act of request and apology?*
3) *What factors influence the interactants' evaluation of interactional explanations?*

The structure of the dissertation

The thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction of the research. I present the significance, objectives of the research. I present specific research questions. I also discuss the terminology in the research and the research methodology and data involved in the studies. Following this introductory chapter, I review the literature of explanation research from different academic disciplines in Chapter 2. I establish the academic niche of the explanation

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[1] In the present work, I use *information appeal* as a neutral term in the definition of *interactional explanation.* The word *information* here refers to the message with the potential of being loaded with pragmatic meanings/functions, which is pertinent to the topic of the interaction.

study in pragmatics. I also review the theories that work closely with the concept of *interactional explanation* in the area of convention and interactional ritual.

In Chapter 3, I develop the working definition of *interactional explanation* and present the essential attributes of the phenomenon with examples. I also explain the rationale of the three major studies reported in the dissertation. The primary exploration of interactional explanation as a unique pragmatic behaviour is to examine the linguistic representation of interactional explanation. This could be achieved through an investigation of discourse corpora to determine its occurrence in interactions (reported in Chapter 4). Secondly, interactional explanations occur with certain speech acts. It is, therefore, enlightening to investigate the correlations between interactional explanation and the corresponding speech act performance (reported in Chapter 5). Finally, first order perception and evaluation of the efficacy of interactional explanations hold the key to understanding the crucial role of interactional explanation (reported in Chapter 6).

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 constitute the core tenets of the thesis. These chapters report three major studies and answer the three specific queries about *interactional explanations*.

Do interactional explanations bear any linguistic features and/or patterns?

Chapter 4 presents an exploration of the linguistic and discursive features of *interactional explanation* based on different discourse corpora. I design parallel studies in English and Chinese, which are both explorative. I first investigate the co-concurrence of the highly frequent causal connectives and interactional explanations in English open discourse corpus from Google Research[2] and multiple Chinese corpora. Additionally, I manually code sample datasets to identify other signalling devices that may distinguish interactional explanations.

Based on the findings, it is argued that linguistic markers of *interactional explanations* are largely dispensable. Interactants tend to recognise information appeals and the presence of *interactional explanations* without linguistic cues. The manual coding reveals the use of diverse linguistic devices, including causal connectives, specific adverbs, and particular sentence structures among others, as markers of *interactional explanations*. The results from the text search and manual coding demonstrate that these linguistic and discursive features of *interactional explanations* span across English and Chinese.

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[2] Google research (https://research.google/) is a platform where the Google research team regularly share research projects as open source.

What is the relationship between interactional explanation and the performance of the speech act of request and apology?

Interactional explanations very often accompany the speech acts of request and apology. Chapter 5 presents the investigations of the interconnection between *interactional explanation* and the performance of the two speech acts. I compare interactional explanations in email requests in academic settings between Chinese and German, highlighting linguacultural differences. Secondly, meta-analyses are conducted to provide an extensive analysis of the factors influencing interactional explanations in apologies.

The findings indicate that the evaluation of interactional explanations in requests significantly correlates with the perception of the request, demonstrating the critical role of interactional explanations in both Chinese and German. However, the pragmatic purposes of interactional explanations differ, with German interactants emphasizing their credibility while Chinese interactants use them to show respect. Linguacultural variations in the use of interactional explanations are found in the assumed pragmatic functions.

The design of meta-analysis for *interactional explanation* study in apology overcomes the limitation of reliability of single study in the area. The meta-analyses of apologies affirm linguacultural differences in the use of interactional explanations. Power distance and social distance of the offense influence the use of *interactional explanations* differently in Chinese and English. Meanwhile, the severity of the offence only seems to influence proportionally the use of interactional explanation among anglophones (Goffman, 1971).

What factors influence the interactants' evaluation of interactional explanations?

In Chapter 6, I use ex post facto interviews to collect metadiscourse data and study the interactants' evaluation of *interactional explanation*. I discover that both the interactional rituals involved in interactions and the attribution types of *the interactional explanation* can influence the interactants' evaluation of *interactional explanation*. Once the perceived rights and obligations endowed by the interactional rituals differ between interactants, chances are that the interaction becomes salient to the interactants, often resulting in negative evaluations. The study on the attribution types of *interactional explanation* reveals that there exists a pattern of evaluation correlates with the attribution types of *interactional explanation*. Chinese participants tend to provide the most positive evaluations for external and uncontrollable attributions, while the internal and controllable attribution elicits the most negative evaluations.

IE modelling

The findings presented in the core chapters contribute significantly to the theoretical understanding of interactional explanation. I make an attempt to model the pragmatic phenomenon of *interactional explanation* in Chapter 7.

The modelling attempt has been compiled in two steps. While *interactional explanations* encompass diverse information, the recurrent discursive norms behind problematic interactional explanations allow a pragmatic modelling of this dynamic interactional phenomenon. Chapter 6 reveals noteworthy and recurrent patterns assumed by the interactants (Chinese participants). Using grounded theory, I first focus on the normative system that the Chinese interactants spontaneously follow in interactions and examine the discursive norms invoked in these interactions(Kádár & Ning, 2019). I draw out normative themes behind the problematic interactional explanations and categorised the metadiscourse data by two distinct contexts: public/business/institutional interactions and private interactions. These recurrent discursive norms constitute the intercultural interactional explanation (IE) model of Chinese. In the public/business/institutional context, I identified six normative themes of *interactional explanations*, including *business/institutional conventions*, *fairness*, *faith, honesty*, *professional ethics*, and *taking responsibility*; in the private context, I identified five themes, including *compromise to the overall situation*, *conflict resolution*, *other-attentiveness*, *life priorities*, *and lifestyles*. The possibility remains that more themes of *interactional explanation* might emerge beyond the present data, but, similarly to universal value studies (Schwartz, 2007), these recurrent normative themes are finite.

Secondly, I develop a general research model of *interactional explanation* (IE). By synthesising the key findings from Chapters 4, 5, and 6, I identify the essential attributes of interactional explanation:

- High occurrence;
- Being a reaction with illocutionary force;
- Context dependence;
- Undetermined linguistic markers;
- Diverse information and functions;
- Instant evaluation.

These attributes play a key role in shaping the dynamics of interactional explanations in interactions, laying the foundation for a formulation of a general research model for pragmatic interactional explanations. The IE Model works through the following two processes:

(a) As a highly contextualised pragmatic phenomenon co-constructed by the interactants, an IE can address diverse aspects of information pertinent to the information appeal developed in the interaction; the aspect of the information addressed in an IE is influenced by the interpersonal relationships of the interactants.

(b) IE addressees make instant interpretations and evaluations of the IE provided; this process becomes salient when an IE contradicts the assumed discursive norm(s).

Considering the various forms and functions, and the diverse information encompassed, a typology of interactional explanations would be constructive for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Based on linguistic presentation, function and (linguacultural) rituals, interactional explanations can be categorised into *definite IE* and *indefinite IE*, *informative IE* and *dispositional IE*, and *ritual IEs*. This typology also allows for more systematic research on this pragmatic phenomenon.

Chapter 8 summarises the major findings of the previous chapters, answers the research questions, and discusses the research models of interactional explanations. The studies conducted on *interactional explanation* reported in this dissertation are far from exhaustive. There are not only ways for advancing the studies conducted in the present work, but also numerous potentials for exploring this intriguing pragmatic phenomenon in interaction. In this final chapter, I also present an outlook on avenues for future research on this pragmatic phenomenon.

Firstly, systematic investigation with the support of targeted corpora could determine whether the use of linguistic markers or other indicative patterns convey different interactional nuances in the phenomenon of *interactional explanation*. The interconnection between *interactional explanation* and speech acts deserves further investigation. In addition to request and apology, this pragmatic phenomenon could accompany the speech act of thank, compliment, complaint among others. Moreover, the meta-analyses of apology found very few studies observing the participants' (first order) evaluations of the speech act performance. Further cross-linguacultural differences in the employment and evaluation of interactional explanation could be enlightening with appropriate research design. Refinement and validation of the general interactional explanation (IE) model, and the intercultural IE model of Chinese could be warranted with more research. Furthermore, the investigation of the relationship between particular interactional ritual/convention and *interactional explanation* constitutes another interesting research prospect. Finally, the occurrence of *interactional explanations* can also occasion (im)politeness and self-politeness. For example, the self-oriented interactional

explanations might be seen as a positive facework in self-politeness (Ning, 2023; Chen, 2001, 2019).

All in all, by delving into this understudied pragmatic phenomenon, this dissertation elucidates this significant pragmatic behaviour and provides valuable insights for future research in related areas.

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Relevant Publications

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2020   Book Review of Pragmatic Identity: How to Do Things with Words of Identity. Chen. Xinren. Beijing Normal University Press, 2018, East Asian Pragmatics, 5(2)279-284. DOI: 10.1558/eap.40442

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Conference presentations:

2023   PEACH Junior Student Conference, PPCU Modern East Asia Research Group, Budapest, Hungary

Presentation: Self-politeness in request: A contrastive view

2022   6th Chinese Pragmatics Forum (panel of Chinese Historical Pragmatics), Beihang University, Beijing, China

Presentation: Interactional explanation: Response to Ren Shaoqing and Pliny's Epistle to Trajan

2021   17th International Pragmatics Conference, Zurich University of Applied Sciences, Winterthur, Switzerland

Presentation: Studies on apologies in Chinese: A meta-analysis

2021   7th China National Pragmatics Symposium, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, China.

Presentation: A contrastive study of requests and explanatory expressions

2021 23rd Warwick International Conference in Applied Linguistics, University of Warwick, Warwick, UK

Presentation: Studies on Chinese apology: A meta-analysis

2021 7th International conference on Cognitive Research on Translation and interpreting, Wuhan University of Technology, Wuhan, China.

Presentation: The translation practice in the professional energy and power industry

2019 16th International Pragmatics Conference The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong

Presentation: Chinese impoliteness in open conflict incurred by extramarital affairs

2019 25th International Conference of the International Association for Intercultural Communication Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic

Presentation: Ritual excuse: Chinese vs. Hungarian: from intercultural communication to interpersonal communication

2019 12th International Conference on (Im)politeness, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK

Presentation: A Meta-analytic review of cross-cultural apology studies

2019 1st East Asian Pragmatics Symposium: Variational Pragmatics in East Asian Languages, Dalian University of Foreign Languages, Dalian, China

Presentation: Cross-cultural apology studies: A meta-analysis

2018 Interpersonal Pragmatics Symposium, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

Presentation: Ritual humiliation: A case study of Chinese

Absztrakt

A jelen disszertáció az interakciós magyarázat jelenségét kutatja, amely sajnálatosan kevés figyelmet kapott a korábbi pragmatikai kutatásokban. Az interakciós magyarázat jelensége információkérésekre adott interakciós válaszok formájában jelenik meg. Noha más kutatási területeken e jelenség kiemelt figyelmet kapott, a pragmatikai kutatásokban meglepő módon elhanyagolták, így replikábilis modellezésével értekezésem tudományos hiányt pótol.

A disszertációban bemutatott modell kevertmódszerű elemzésen alapul, amely az interakciós magyarázat jelenségét, illetve annak nyelvi elemeit empirikus módon, korpuszok segítségével vizsgálja. Kiemelt figyelmet fordítok az interakciós magyarázat beszédaktus alapú vizsgálatára: e jelenséget a kérés és bocsánatkérés beszédaktusai segítségével közelítem meg. Vizsgálom továbbá interakciós magyarázatok értelmezéseit metadiskurzív adatok segítségével, amelyeket post facto interjúk során gyűjtöttem.

Kutatásom rámutat arra, hogy az interakciós magyarázatok, illetve magyarázatkérések létrejöttében a nyelvi jelölők nélkülözhetetlenek. Az interakciós magyarázatul szolgáló kérések és bocsánatkérések realizációiban számos nyelvkulturális variációt figyelhetünk meg. A kutatásból kiderül továbbá, hogy az interakciós rítusok befolyásolhatják, hogy egy adott interakciós magyarázatot a résztvevők milyen módon ítélnek meg. Ezen eredmények alapján a disszertációban kidolgozom Interakciós Magyarázat Modellemet (IE Model), és egy kapcsolódó, kínai nyelvi adatokra használható kultúraközi kommunikációs modellt.

A fenti modell a pragmatikai és interakciós kutatásokhoz járul hozzá elsősorban. A modell ugyancsak hozzájárul a beszédaktusok összehasonlító kutatásához, továbbá az interakciós rítuselmélethez és a nyelvi udvariasságkutatáshoz.