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Research on Online Discourse of Cross-Border E-commerce Platform on the Basis of Co-operative Principle

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Abstract

China's cross-border e-commerce industry has shown a blow-out trend fueled by the rapidly-improved informatization of the society and powerful support of government. However, the increasing platforms in the market, the homogenizing merchandise, and the decreasing of conversion cost bring enormous challenges to the platforms. In order to survive in the fierce competition, they must improve the quality of services in the communication with consumers so as to enhance the core competitiveness centered on consumers. In this research, we compiled 100 real cases of cross-border e-commerce platform online discourse by collecting chat records from the online interaction between 50 college students and the platform merchants on the Tmall international platform. This study analyzes these online discourse cases from the perspective of Grice's Co-operative principle. The study demonstrates that, the application of Grice's Co-operative principle can enable cross-border e-commerce platforms to effectively adopt and employ the most appropriate interactive discourse, which exerts an tremendous influence on improving the quality of communication services. And there is a positive correlation between the usage of the Co-operative principle and the monthly sales volume of the platform.

Key words: Co-operative principle; Cross-border e-commerce platform; Online discourse; The context of new media

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, cross-border e-commerce has thrived because of the powerful support from police and the development of social informatization. The General Secretary Xi Jinping has said on the opening ceremony of the first China International Import Expo (CIIE), "China's door will never be closed. It will only open still wider. We will take further steps to lower tariffs, facilitate customs clearance, reduce institutional costs in import, and step up cross-border e-commerce and other new forms and models of business." According to *2019 White Paper on Trends and Opportunities in China's Cross-border E-Commerce Exports* released by CBN Data, China's share in cross-border e-commerce exports has increased from 2.2% to 7.7% over the past five years. And by 2018, the export scale has exceeded one trillion. Although there was fast development in cross-border e-commerce, the rapid increase of platforms, homogenization of commodities, lower conversion costs for consumers, and diversified online consuming choices are posing great challenges to the current development of cross-border e-commerce platforms.

Schmitt (2010) argued that the competition among cross-border e-commerce companies lay in customers' experience, not in commodities anymore, and customer

experience had been the key to the enhancement of companies' core competitiveness. With the development of globalization, people's communication patterns, learning methods and information dissemination channels have undergone earth-shaking changes (Qiu, 2020). Miyazaki (2001) pointed out that the service quality provided by the online platforms of cross-border e-commerce corporations would have a direct impact on the consumers' willingness to purchase. Chen Xiao (2018) constructed the theoretical framework of cross-border e-commerce customers' comments on experience. He thought the development of Chinese cross-border e-commerce must stress the importance of customers' experience and corporations should provide customers more personalized products and services, which was the key to enhancing cross-border e-commerce core competitiveness. Luo Jun (2017) used the AliExpress as an example to analyze the skills for preventing customers disputes in the B2C condition. And he concluded that merchants on platforms must grasp their customers' need and prevent the disputes from the outset to improve customer satisfaction, which could settle disputes from the origin place.

Therefore, these platforms need to upgrade consumer-centric services, especially the online service talking with consumers, if they want to gain an advantage over their competitors. But for now, there has been little research based on the Co-operative principle to analyze the online communication discourse of cross-border e-commerce platforms and few scholars using the theory of pragmatics to research on the problems in the cross-border e-commerce industry. To further study the role of the Co-operative principle in the cross-border e-commerce online communication process, this article will analyze the online communication discourse of cross-border e-commerce platforms by using the Co-operative principle, with the goal to help cross-border e-commerce platforms improve the online communication service quality and thus enhance the consumer-centric competitiveness.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

The Co-operative principle was introduced by Herbert Paul Grice for the first time, the British linguist, in his lecture delivered at Harvard University. He thought that communicators follow certain principle consciously or unconsciously during communication. Grice proposed the Co-operative principle (Feng, 2008) since both sides could tacitly guess the intention of each other. Co-operative principle and its maxims make it ensure that an appropriate amount of information could be provided in communicating and interact in a real, related and clear way (Huang, 2007). *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* writes that Grice's summary of the universal principles of conversation opened up a new era in pragmatics. It concludes four maxims (Grice, 1975;

Huang, 2007) — Quantity maxim, Quality maxim, Relation maxim and Manner maxim. In a conversation, Quantity maxim requires that what is said by two communicating parties should meet the amount of information needed for communication and not exceed the amount. Quality maxim requires that participants could guarantee the provided content is authentic information and no false message with a lack of evidence. Relation maxim requires the provided information is relevant to the ongoing conversation and the discourse is purposeful and sticking to the theme. Manner maxim requires the information to be clear, concise and organized, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

As a new form of communicating nowadays, cross-border e-commerce platforms online communication complies with or contradicts the Co-operative principle intentionally or unintentionally. Cross-border e-commerce platforms are supposed to determine appropriate online communication discourse according to Co-operative principle and combining with consumers' individualized purchasing need to ensure the communicating discourse is brief, reliable and sticking closely to the consumers' purchasing psychology, so as to improve the quality of online communicating service and trigger their willingness to buy.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Research Question

This study aims to answer the following questions:

How could cross-border e-commerce platforms choose and adopt the appropriate discourse in online communication according to Co-operative Principle?

Is there a positive correlation between usage of Co-operative principle and the monthly sales volume of the platform?

3.2 Corpus Collection

According to *China Cross-Border E-Commerce Market Research Report 2018-2019* released by iiMedia Research, Kaola, Tmall, and Haidun Global respectively hold 27.1%, 24% and 13.2% of the market share in 2018, and have become the top3 in the cross-border e-commerce market. Toiletries, beauty makeup and nutraceutical are the most purchased products in the oversea online market. Based on above data combined with college students' online shopping preferences for platforms, the author choose Tmall International as the cross-border e-commerce platform for this study and selects college students' online conversation discourse with platforms merchants when buying toiletries, beauty makeup and nutraceutical on Tmall platform as the material for this study.

3.3 Experimental Design

This study recruited 50 college students as online consumers and divided them into 4 groups:

The corpus for this study was collected from 50 college students as online consumers and we divided them into 4 groups in terms of the types of their purchase. The first three groups numbered 15, 15, and 10 respectively and the products they bought were toiletries, beauty makeup and nutraceutical. Everyone was required to consult two stores with the highest and lowest monthly sales from the same product catalog. The fourth group had 10 students consulted the stores with the highest and lowest monthly sales and no restriction on product catalogs. Except the fourth group, other group members need to ask the questions below when purchasing (Table1). At the same time, to ensure the authenticity and fluency of the online communication process, group members could add relevant words and the specific communication should include, but not limited to, the following questions.

Table 1
12 Frequently asked questions during online shopping by college students

No.	Question Content
1	Excuse me?
2	Do you have this product in stock?
3	May I ask where you import this product from? What are the production date and shelf life?
4	Is this genuine? I bought a fake one last time.
5	How could I check its authenticity?
6	Okay, are the physical look and function as the same as the description of the store pictures? Will there be more differences?
7	I am a college student, what's the effect if I use it? Is there any other college student to buy it? What about the feedback?
8	Do you guarantee the after-sales protection and service?
9	Is there any discount if I buy more? My friends also want to buy it, is there any giveaway?
10	It's my first time to buy your products, please give me a discount, by the way, the same product in other store seems cheaper than yours.
11	Dear, I am a student and really like your product. I have focused on it for a while, so can you give me a discount?
12	Well, I'll consider it again and come back tomorrow.

3.4 Material Organization

The collected corpus in this study was from the original chat records of online communication between consumers and platform merchants, which was authentic and reliable. Eventually, a total of 103,600 words were collected from 100 complete and authentic online communication cases, each case containing 24 communication messages at minimum. All cases were odd-even numbered in the study, with odd numbers being the high-selling shop online communication cases and even numbers being the low-selling shop online communication cases. In the process of discourse analysis, the author selected four cases for analysis in odd-number cases and even-number cases each.

4. ONLINE CONVERSATION DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TMALL PLATFORM

4.1 Quantity Maxim

Table 2
Case1 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	Hello? Is anyone there?	Dear, I am here. How can I help you?
2	Do you have this product in stock?	It is available if you can buy and pay the bill. It will be indicated on the product page if it's for reservation.
3	May I ask where you import this product from? What are the production date and shelf life?	Dear, the product's shelf life is 3 years, goods are dispatched from free trade zones without our handling. So, you can check the production date after you receive it. We guarantee that our goods are within period of validity, don't worry about it!
4	Is this genuine? I bought a fake one last time.	Dear, this overseas flagship store is officially authorized by the brand. All goods are directly provided by the brand and bonded warehouses directly arrange customs clearance and shipment under the customs supervision. No third party could access to the goods, fully guaranteeing that the goods we sell are original.
5	How could I check its authenticity?	Dear, our home page has the only authorization and Tmall's official recognition, guaranteeing its authenticity. If in doubt, you can call the Tmall hotline for consulting.

Note: This product has 11,000 monthly transactions.

Quantity maxim requires platforms merchants to provide an appropriate amount of content in response to different consumers' questions and solving their problems. When consumers ask simple questions about price, shelf life, shipping location, etc., brief messages from the platform merchant are sufficient. When consumers ask questions about product quality, after-sales service and consumer experience, etc., platforms merchants should give specific answers to fully demonstrate the product's advantage. In the case 1, when the consumer asked "Is the product available?", "What are the production date and shelf life?", "Is it authentic?", something about the quality of the product, the merchant gave detailed information such as "3-year warranty", "overseas flagship store officially authorized by the brand" and "call the Tmall hotline" which were clear, appropriate, informative and timely. The consumer didn't ask further more about the answers, and the communication process was very smooth, achieving the purpose of communication.

Table 3
Case 2 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	Okay, are the physical look and function the same as the description of the store pictures? Will there be much differences?	You could look at the product page which shows the real-shooting pictures.
2	I am a college student, what's the effect if I use it? Is there any other college student buying it? What about the feedback?	The protection effect from sun is quite good.
3	Do you guarantee the after-sales protection and service?	No answer.
4	Is there discount if I buy more? My friends also want to buy, is there any giveaway?	There is no activity right now.
5	It's my first time to buy your products, give me some discount, by the way, the same product in other store seems cheaper than yours.	There is no activity right now and price is subject to the company's order.
6	Dear, I am a student and really like your product. I have cared about it for a while, can you give me some discounts?	We don't support that.
7	Well, I'll consider it some more and come back tomorrow.	Okay.

Note: This product has 18 monthly transactions.

In the process of the online communication, the violation of Quantity maxim by platform merchants may trigger consumer dissatisfaction, and providing too much information can create consumer confusion, less information may directly result in consumer's abandonment of purchasing willingness. In the case 2, on the one hand, the platform merchant was unable to reply the message timely. On the other hand, the merchant couldn't provide enough information when consumer asked in the conversation. For example, when consumer asked about the product effect, the merchant only gave the answer that "The protection effect from sun is quite good". When consulted

about the discount, merchant only answered "there is no activity right now and price is subject to the company's order". When the consumer was leaving, the merchant only said "okay". In this conversation, the platform merchant severely violated the Quantity maxim, not providing the sufficient relative product information. Especially when it came to asking key questions about product quality, after-sales, customer experience, etc., the platform merchant failed to describe in detail and demonstrate the core advantageous features of their products, resulting in consumers being dissatisfied with the goods and services, and ultimately failing to make the transaction.

4.2 Quality Maxim

Table 4
Case 3 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	Is this genuine? I bought a fake one last time.	Dear, our store is the overseas flagship store officially authorized by the brand. All goods are provided by the manufacture and authenticity is guaranteed. The sunscreen is very creamy and won't be a burden on your face. It's waterproof and don't have to worry about causing acne.
2	How could I check its authenticity?	The products in our official overseas flagship store are from 100% authentic source and authorized to be 100% genuine goods. Please feel comfortable while buying. If you have any question about the product, please contact our official service hotline, we will be happy to serve you.
3	Can I verify it by scanning the QR code on the product?	There is no scanning software on the market is officially certified, so scanning the code is unable to identify the authenticity. We recommend you to log in our official website, you can find the quality inspection report of the product in the shop page. Our store is officially authorized by the brand. Hope you can find favorable products.

Note: This product has 77 thousand monthly transactions.

Quality Maxim requires platform merchants to provide consumers with commodity-related information, to ensure the authenticity, reliability, authority of the information, can't provide false information or the information lacking of sufficient evidence. Especially when consumers ask questions about commodity quality, after-sales service or others, provide authentic information in accordance with Quality maxim and increase platform merchants must consumers' trust and curiosity to the products. In the case 3, for consumers' questions about the quality of goods, the platform merchants could give detailed explanation and timely provided authentic methods for query and official quality inspection reports to ensure the given information being authentic and remove consumers' doubt about the products, which followed the Quality maxim.

Table 5
Case 4 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	Is this imported from America? What about the production date and shelf life?	Dear, it's imported from the bonded warehouse in the United States. You can believe that our products are genuine.
2	How could I check its authenticity?	Dear, there is backdated information on its logistics.
3	Okay, are the physical look and function as the same as the description of the store pictures? Will there be more differences?	Dear, it's almost same.
4	Is it appropriate for college students to use it? And is there a lot of college students who want to buy this as me?	Dear, it's appropriate for you and there is a lot.

Note: This product has 14 monthly transactions.

During the online exchanges, violations of Quality maxim by platform merchants may lead to consumers' distrust of transaction process. And consumers will generally abandon consumption when the quality of goods can't be guaranteed. In the case 4, when the consumer asked about the quality of the product, the platform merchant didn't provide probative information such as its origin, date of manufacture and shelf life of the product, but only answered "it's imported from the bonded

warehouse in the United States. You can rest assured that our products are genuine". And he didn't provide the means of searching, and verbal explanations don't assuage consumer's concerns. When consumer consulted how's the product's effect, the merchant only replied with vague phrases such as "almost", "quite a lot". Those answers above violated the Quality maxim which results in consumers' doubt to the goods and stops the normal process of transaction.

4.3 Relation Maxim

Table 6
Case 5 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	Hello? Are you there?	Yes, my lady. Welcome!
2	Excuse me, do you have this product in stock?	Yes, we do.
3	Okay, what about the production date and shelf life?	Dear, we are not close to the warehouse. So the specific date is not clear and it's determined by the product you receive. We guarantee that all the products we sell are within the warranty period!
4	Okay, how to identify the genuine product. I bought a fake one last time.	Dear lady, we're the brand owners and there is authorization and purchasing certificate which are put on the pages. You can go and check it out. We guarantee authenticity and support comparison with the same products in malls!
5	How to identify the genuine product?	We guarantee authenticity and support comparison with counters!
6	I am a college student, what's the effect if I use it? Is there any other college student who is going to buy it? What about the feedback?	Many college students, the effect is quite good. You can take a look at the comments. A lot of students give positive comments.
7	Do you guarantee the after-sales protection and service? How to handle the expired product?	No cosmetic could be guaranteed 100% non-allergic. Even the natural products also have allergic components. Since everyone's skin is not same, we recommend you to test it behind the ear after you've received the product. If there is an allergic phenomenon, we also have excellent after-sales service and will give you a satisfactory solution.

Note: This product has 75 thousand monthly transactions.

Relation maxim requires the content that speakers express are relevant to the topic instead of irrelevant words. Under the guidance of Relation maxim, platform merchants should answer what is asked when communicating with consumers online, responding with a focus on the core strength of the goods. In the case 5,

when communicating with the consumer, the platform merchant followed the Relation maxim and answer what was asked such as commodity quality and after-sales service, effectively solving the consumer's problems about the product and triggering the willingness to buy.

Table 7
Case6 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	How could I check its authenticity?	Anti-counterfeiting checking: unveil the surface of security code, and scan the QR code. Follow our official account. Click the "anti-counterfeiting checking" and scan the QR code again. Enter the identity verification center and click the "immediate inquiry" to identify the authenticity.
2	Okay, are the physical look and function as the same as described in the store pictures? Will there be much differences? ... Are you there?	All these are real-shooting pictures.
3	I am a college student, what's the effect if I use it? Is there any other college student to buy it? What about the feedback?	Do you have any questions?
4	Do you guarantee the after-sales protection and service? ... Excuse me?	Do you have any questions?
5	Is there any discount if I buy more? My friends also want to buy, is there any giveaway?	It's a favorable price.
6	Dear, I am a student and really like your product. I have focused on it for a while, can you give me a discount?	No reply.
7	Well, I'll consider it again and come back tomorrow. (Unread) Thank you!	No reply.

Note: This product has 90 monthly transactions.

During the online exchanges, platform merchants violate Relation maxim, which can create confusion for consumers during the shopping process and hinder the transaction process. In case 6, the online communication process between the platform merchant and the consumer didn't go well. On the one hand, platform merchant didn't reply the customer's message on time, and the timing of the conversation suggested that there was a significant delay in the merchant's response. When the consumer expressed to reconsider in the end, there was

no response from the merchant. On the other hand, the platform merchant didn't answer what was asked. For example, when consumer asked about the product effect, the merchant replied that "All these are real-shooting pictures". In the several conversations, the merchant didn't reply to the message, resulting in the robotic response from the server background and didn't answer what was asked. The transaction process obviously violated the Relation maxim, leading to the consumer terminated the transaction.

4.4 Manner Maxim

Table 8
Case 7 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	Do you have this product in stock?	Yes, we do!
2	May I ask where do you import this product? What is the production date and shelf life?	Dear, our overseas flagship store in Tmall is directly operated by the brand. All the goods are directly provided by the company in France, guaranteeing 100% genuine. Please rest assured to buy! The shelf life is 3 years. And the goods are randomly delivered from warehouse. So, we can tell you the specific production life after you receive the product.
3	How to identify its authenticity? I bought a fake one last time.	Dear, the shop has complete overseas factory inspection. Tmall only provides traceable numbers service for products of mask and serums catalogues. For these products, you can find the traceable information at "Orders" on the app. There are no traceable numbers for other catalogue, but all the goods are directly supplied by the company in France, guaranteeing the genuine goods. Our store has officially authorized certificate by the brand and could guarantee the authenticity.
4	I'm now a college student. Is it appropriate for me to use? How about other students' feedback?	There are the pictures from other consumers' feedback. It's suitable for you. Dear, Meso-Mask is our star product. It can quickly be effective in moisturizing and hydration, brightening the skin, firming the skin, as well as minimizing pores and smoothing the wrinkles. A bottle to meet a variety of skin needs.

Note: This product has 5152 thousand monthly transactions.

Manner maxim requires platform merchants to keep their answers as simple and well-organized as possible during online communication with consumers, avoiding obscure and Ambiguity. In the Case 7, the platform merchant was able to answer consumer's questions in a clear and concise manner, and clearly indicated the

product advantages. For example, when consumer asked the after-sales feedback of the product, the platform merchant promptly displayed the feedback pictures and explained the after-sales experience of the product, which adequately reflected the Manner maxim.

Table 9
Case 8 of online conversation discourse of tmall platform

No.	Consumer	Merchant
1	May I ask where you import this product from? What are the production date and shelf life?	Australia.
2	Is this genuine? I bought a fake one last time.	Our store is overseas flagship store operating with authorization of Australian post, no fake product and guaranteeing authentic. Please rest assured to buy it.
3	Okay, are the physical look and function as the same as described in the store pictures? Will there be much differences?	No, our goods are imported from other countries.
4	And do you guarantee the after-sales protection and service?	Product can be returned if there is quality issue. Our store is Tmall cross-border platform, due to its special characteristics, currently we don't support seven days of no reason to return or exchange. China Customs has very strict supervision policies on direct mail imports purchased by individuals, and once cleared, the imported goods cannot be returned.

Note: This product has no monthly transactions.

In the conversation, the platform merchant's violation of simple and clear Manner maxim will make it difficult for consumers to understand what the platform merchant is saying and wills. In the case 8, platform merchants failed to provide organized and logical answers to

consumers' questions, creating ambiguity. For example, when consumer asked "are the physical look and function the same as described in the store pictures? Will there be much differences?" the platform merchant replied "No, our goods are imported from other countries". According

to the principle of one-to-one correspondence, the answer of “No” may make consumers misunderstand that the effect is different from the description, and the answer of “our goods are imported from other countries” didn’t make a good explanation, which would make consumers obscure and difficult to understand. When the customer inquired about the after-sales service, the merchant’s answer is illogical, saying it can be returned but don’t support seven days of no reason to return or exchange at the same time. And didn’t reply how to provide the after-sales service. The communication process is not clearly organized, which is a serious violation of the Manner maxim.

5. STUDY FINDINGS OF ONLINE DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TMALL PLATFORM

Online conversation on cross-border e-commerce platforms is an important strategy in transaction process, and plays a key role in the success of transaction (Lou, 2014). In this paper, we analyzed 100 real cases of online communication on cross-border e-commerce platform and

study the existing problems in cross-border e-commerce industry from the unique perspective of pragmatics. And explore positive impact of Co-operative principle, drawing the conclusions that:

First of all, in the online conversation on cross-border e-commerce platforms, the utilization rate of Co-operative principle and its maxims is positively correlated with the monthly sales volume of the platform.

The author used SPSS software to analyze the correlation between the usage of Co-operative principle and monthly sales of 100 cross-border e-commerce platforms. From Table 10, it can be seen that the Pearson correlation coefficient between “monthly sales volume of the platform” and “the utilization rate of Co-operative principle” is 0.687, i.e. $r = 0.687 > 0$, which indicates that the correlation between monthly sales volume of the platform and the utilization rate of Co-operative principle is significant and positive. Therefore, the online communication process of cross-border e-commerce enterprises can effectively trigger consumers’ demand of purchasing by determining the appropriate discourse based on Grice’s Cooperation Principle, which in turn increases monthly sales of goods.

Table 10
Analysis of correlation between monthly sales volume of the platform and the utilization rate of co-operative principle

		Monthly Sales Volume of the Platform	Utilization Rate of Co-operative Principle
Monthly Sales Volume of the Platform	Pearson Correlation	1	0.687
	Significance (bilateral)	100	100
Utilization Rate of Co-operative Principle	Pearson Correlation	0.687	1
	Significance (bilateral)	100	100

Second, Leveraging Grice’s Co-operative principles can effectively help cross-border e-commerce platforms determine the appropriate online communication discourse, which can have a significant positive impact on improving the quality of communication services.

Cross-border e-commerce platforms should determine the online conversation discourse that fits for consumers who have different consuming demand based on Co-operative principle and its four maxims. According to the Quantity maxim, cross-border e-commerce platforms will use the refined language to present the core advantageous features of the products in the online communication process with consumers, and strive to convert consumers’ initial intentions into actual orders within a short period of time. According to the Quality maxim, cross-border e-commerce platforms are supposed to know well about the information of commodities, and provide materials such as searching methods of authenticity and official quality inspection reports timely to eliminate consumers’ doubts about the quality of commodities. And in line with

Relation maxim, cross-border e-commerce platforms need to be able to answer what consumers ask in the online communication process, and grasp the appropriate response time to avoid background robots automatically responding with irrelevant content. According to the Manner maxim, the words that cross-border e-commerce platforms use should be concise and logical, clearly express the attitude and professionalism. In the real operation process, cross-border e-commerce platforms could establish a suitable online communication language template based on commodities’ characteristic, which lays a good foundation for smooth exchange.

In the subsequent research, we will expand the scope of the research subjects which include other consumer groups of different ages, collecting their online communication discourse with platform merchants for the study, and try to analyze it from other theoretical perspectives in pragmatics in order to improve the scientific validity and effectiveness of the study.

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