

The Relationship between Pragmatic Awareness in Elders and their Utilization of Conflict Strategies in Inter-generational Family Conflicts

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Abstract

This study investigates the pragmatic awareness and utilization of conflict strategies among a cohort of 128 Chinese elderly individuals in the context of inter-generational conflict, employing methods such as questionnaires and interviews. The findings are as follows: (1) A paradoxical relationship emerges in the pragmatic awareness and utilization of conflict strategies among the elderly in family inter-generational conflict. While they exhibit an awareness of maintaining personal positive face, there is a lack of proactive behavior in upholding it. (2) The deployment of conflict strategies by the elderly aligns with the semantic characteristics of the conflict situation. Notably, when confronted with material conflicts, their conflict perception and utilization of conflict strategies intensify. (3) The pragmatic awareness of the elderly in family inter-generational conflict demonstrates varying regression effects on the utilization of conflict strategies, with the degree of influence being constrained by the specific conflict context. The study results underscore that the employment of conflict strategies by the elderly is a complex cognitive process, representing the synergistic outcome of internal cognitive factors and external environmental influences.

Keywords: family inter-generational conflict; the elders; pragmatic awareness; conflict strategy

1. Introduction

The examination of conflict and reconciliation is fundamental to understanding the intricacies of interpersonal communication, constituting normative aspects of discourse selection and reflecting linguistic power dynamics within specific contexts (Ran, 2010). However, within the academic realm, a historical bias towards impoliteness phenomena has often marginalized the discourse of conflict, resulting in insufficient attention being devoted to its nuanced complexities (Kakava, 2001). Recently, there has been a growing awareness within academia regarding the significance of conflict discourse, recognizing it as a crucial supplement to traditional politeness perspectives, with substantial impacts on interpersonal communication and communicative outcomes (Wang, 2015).

Despite this increasing recognition, the existing body of research predominantly focuses on conflict in public settings, such as offices, studios, or press conferences. This emphasis on public spheres leaves a noticeable gap in understanding interpersonal conflicts within private contexts, particularly in familial settings. The familial unit, being a primary locus of interpersonal relationships, represents a critical arena where conflicts unfold, making it imperative to extend the scholarly investigation to these private domains. A comprehensive understanding of conflict discourse necessitates an exploration of its manifestation within the intimate dynamics of family relationships.

Moreover, a notable gap exists in the literature concerning the discourse behavior of the elderly as primary actors in conflict situations. While existing studies have made strides in acknowledging the significance of considering diverse demographic groups in communication research, there remains a scarcity of dedicated inquiries into how the elderly engage in and navigate conflicts within the family. The elderly, often positioned as central figures in familial structures, bring unique perspectives and experiences to conflict situations, which merit thorough scholarly investigation.

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In the context of China's deepening aging process, the emergence of inter-generational conflict between elderly individuals and their adult children has become a notable familial contradiction, solidifying the "old-middle" conflict as a societal norm. Within this societal framework, it becomes imperative to delve into the intricate dynamics of how elderly individuals perceive interpersonal conflicts within the family and navigate relationships with their adult children during such contentious moments. This study aims to place elderly individuals at the center of their lifeworld, undertaking an exploration of their pragmatic awareness and communicative strategies when confronted with inter-generational conflicts within the family context. By doing so, the research seeks to shed light on the specific interpersonal dynamics that unfold in familial conflict scenarios.

2. Literature Review

Conflict discourse refers to the clash between one party's speech and another's, manifested as opposition to the words, actions, or behaviors of the communicative counterpart or arising from differing opinions on someone or something, leading to discourse conflict (Zhao 2004). In the field of linguistics, research on conflict discourse predominantly adopts two perspectives: discourse analysis and pragmatics. Scholars have extensively explored various aspects of conflict discourse, including conversation structure, linguistic representation, pragmatic effects, and discourse generation mechanisms (Grimshaw, 1990; Muntigl & Turnbull, 1998; Planken, 2005). Research indicates that beyond the inherent reasons within discourse, factors external to the discourse, such as social psychological aspects of the interacting parties, involving personal values, social identity, and perception of social rights, contribute to offense against the listener (Shen & He, 2010).

Regarding interpersonal conflicts within the family environment, Lai (2016) identified three main strategies employed by family members in response to conflicts: conflict strategies, false "conciliation" strategies, and silence. These strategies aim to reinforce opposition between parties, disrupting their relationship. Zheng and Chen (2019) focused on conflicts between parents and underage children within families, discussing the pragmatic features of conflict discourse and the mechanisms underlying impoliteness phenomena. While these studies enhance our understanding of interpersonal conflicts among family members in China, emphasizing both the general pragmatic features of conflict discourse and the power struggles over identity and authority within specific interpersonal relationships, they mainly concentrate on conflicts between spouses or conflicts involving parents and underage children. There has been limited systematic discussion on conflicts between elderly individuals and their adult children. He (2018) contends that discussions on interpersonal relationships should consider both traditional cultural values and current social realities. In the context of "old-middle" relationships within families, traditional cultural norms dictate filial piety and respect for elders; however, societal developments have diminished hierarchical authority between generations, leading to children challenging and criticizing their parents. Given this context, the changing family cultural environment for contemporary Chinese elderly individuals requires further exploration of their strategies for handling interpersonal relationships during family conflicts.

Simultaneously, there is room for further discussion on related issues. Firstly, existing research, while recognizing the roles and influences of external factors such as family background, gender, and identity in conflict discourse, often neglects the examination of communicative agents and their rationality. Current discourse conflict is heavily influenced by the instrumental rationality of subject centrality, emphasizing communicative purposes and strategies, rendering communicative agents as controlled entities devoid of freedom (Zhang, 2020). Pragmatic awareness is an individual's consciousness and sensitivity to the pragmatic rules and realizations determined by specific communicative context characteristics (Hu, 2007). As a form of psychological perception, it emerges from rational reflections on objective reality in communicative processes, serving as the basis for individuals to regulate and control these processes. However, pragmatic awareness results from individual socialization, influenced by social organization and cultural factors. The acquired value standards and self-perceptions may vary, leading to differences in interpreting specific speech behavior norms (Cai & Wang, 2015). By approaching the study from the perspective of pragmatic awareness, an exploration of the rational cognition of elderly individuals can provide a possible explanatory framework for their communicative strategy selection during inter-generational family conflicts, enriching existing research topics.

Secondly, while existing conflict studies emphasize the analysis and interpretation of interpersonal meanings in communicative processes, the contextual features of conflict events themselves are not given sufficient attention. In terms of inter-generational exchange patterns, family conflicts between the "old" and the "middle" involve emotional aspects such as solace and familial care, as well as practical aspects like caregiving and economic assistance (Ma, 2007). However, current research primarily focuses on emotional conflicts, neglecting material conflicts. Incorporating conflict situations into the study of family conflict discourse could make discussions on communicative strategies of elderly individuals more targeted from external social perspectives and enhance the explanatory power of relevant theories.

Building on the above insights, this study attempts to investigate how differences in conflict situations and pragmatic awareness lead to variations in communicative strategies for elderly individuals in Chinese society facing inter-generational family conflicts. The focus is on three key questions:

What characteristics do elderly individuals exhibit in the use of conflict strategies and pragmatic awareness in inter-generational family conflicts?

Do the use of conflict strategies and pragmatic awareness of elderly individuals differ based on different conflict situations?

In various conflict situations, what relationship exists between pragmatic awareness and the use of conflict strategies by elderly individuals?

The choice of conflict strategies over other strategies is primarily due to the prevalence of their use in conflict situations, highlighting their prototypical characteristics (Zhang, 2020). Moreover, within the constraints of specific interpersonal relationships among family members, the use of conflict strategies often involves complex underlying social rules, making them more revealing of the interpersonal relationship management orientation of family members.

Presently, the family structure in Chinese society is transitioning from the traditional "pyramid" structure, where the older generation has more authority, to a more elongated and balanced oval structure. This demographic shift increases the burden on the middle-aged generation in terms of elderly care, consequently leading to intensified family conflicts. The results of this study contribute to a deeper understanding of the relationship between pragmatic awareness and communicative strategies in the field of interpersonal pragmatics. Furthermore, it offers insights into the current linguistic life of elderly individuals within the family in contemporary China, providing guidance for mitigating inter-generational conflicts in the construction of harmonious families.

3. Research Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 128 elderly individuals from the Zhejiang China, ranging in age from 60 to 65 years. The sample comprised 64 males and 64 females. All participants were free from evident language, mobility, psychological, and dementia-related impairments.

3.2 Research Tools

The study utilized a self-designed survey questionnaire with two sections. The first section presented specific descriptions of conflict scenarios. Drawing on the research findings of Ma (2007), the researchers categorized the conflict scenarios into two types: material conflicts and emotional conflicts, each comprising three distinct conflict events. To control for the influence of social distance in the context, the conflicts were limited to those between elderly parents and their adult sons. A representative description of a conflict event is provided in Table 1.

Table 1 - Classification of Conflict Scenarios and Descriptive Language

Conflict Scenarios	Conflict Scenario Description
Material Conflict	Grandmother (or Grandfather) Zhang has always been very interested in elderly health. One time, after listening to a salesperson, she (he) purchased health supplements costing over ten thousand yuan. When her (his) son found out, he became very angry and accused her (him): "You've become confused in your old age, buying these deceptive products? Where did the money go?"
Emotional Conflict	Grandmother (or Grandfather) Wang has two sons. After the younger son divorced and became busy with his business, he entrusted the care of his young grandson to Grandmother (or Grandfather) Wang. The elder son felt a bit displeased and accused her (him): "The facts are right in front of you, you are clearly showing favoritism."

The second part of the questionnaire comprises assessments of conflict resolution strategy utilization and pragmatic awareness. Conflict resolution strategy usage primarily focuses on the likelihood of respondents employing conflict resolution strategies in the aforementioned scenarios.

Pragmatic awareness, based on Kasper's (1984) relevant discourse, approaches the recognition of behaviors and their consequences within the context, encompassing three aspects: personal face, communicative politeness, and interpersonal relationships.

The assessments are conducted using a Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 5, where 1 indicates "highly unlikely (disagree)" and 5 indicates "highly likely (agree)." Participants are instructed to envision themselves as elderly individuals in the stated conflict scenarios and select appropriate numerical values based on their personal circumstances. For illiterate elderly participants, data collection is conducted through interviews. A typical example is provided below:

- (1) Responding to him with strong words in disagreement Very Unlikely 1 2 3 4 5 Very Likely
- (2) Do you perceive this as a highly face-threatening behavior? Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree
- (3) Do you consider the son's words to be very impolite? Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree
- (4) Do you believe that your rebuttal would harm the familial affection between you? Strongly Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Agree

Simultaneously, to address the limitations of quantitative analysis, the researchers will conduct interviews with four elderly individuals (two males and two females) to further gather qualitative data, enhancing the interpretive depth of the study results. The interviews will primarily focus on two aspects: (1) personal attributions towards familial conflict phenomena, and (2) the impact of familial conflict on interpersonal relationships within the family.

3.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of the pertinent data was performed utilizing SPSS 19.0, employing three primary statistical methods. Firstly, descriptive statistical analysis was applied to assess the present status of pragmatic awareness and conflict strategy usage across different conflict scenarios. Subsequently, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to scrutinize variations in pragmatic awareness and conflict strategy usage among the diverse conflict situations. Finally, correlation analysis and regression analysis were employed to delve into the potential relationships between pragmatic awareness and conflict strategy usage across the various conflict scenarios.

4. Findings and Discussion

Comprehensive Analysis of Pragmatic Awareness and Conflict Strategies

Table 2 Pragmatic Awareness and Utilization of Conflict Resolution Strategies

	N	Mean Value	Standard Deviation
Material Conflict	128	2.60	1.192
Individual Face	128	3.08	1.169
Impoliteness	128	3.29	1.276
Interpersonal Relationships	128	2.06	1.030

Table 2 indicates that the willingness of the elderly to adopt conflict resolution strategies is not very strong when facing intergenerational conflicts within the family, with a mean value of only 2.60, falling below the critical threshold of 3. Zheng Hui and Chen Fang (2019) posit that minor-aged children, as the disadvantaged party, actively challenge the authoritative status of their dominant parents to strive for equal standing and rights in intergenerational communication. Consequently, the discourse of intergenerational conflict between "children-parents" tends to be more intense. However, contrary to these findings, the results of this study suggest that conflict resolution strategies are not the preferred choice for the elderly in the context of family intergenerational conflicts. The intergenerational discourse and destructiveness within the "elderly-adult children" conflicts are not particularly strong.

Considering the interview data, several factors may contribute to these findings. Firstly, as individuals age, their mindset tends to become more tranquil, lacking the impulsive nature of seeking dominance and competition experienced in their youth. In the face of family conflicts, they are more inclined to adopt strategies that mitigate rather than escalate the conflict.

Secondly, in the course of the life development process, the relationship between elderly parents and adult children transitions from a nurturing to a providing role. The elderly become more dependent on their adult children, demonstrating passivity in intergenerational conflicts. Some elderly individuals directly express sentiments such as, "I'm old now, it's pointless to argue, just listen more to (my son)." Lastly, the conflict scenarios in this study primarily focus on the elderly as the party at fault, which might result in a lack of motivation for them to assert their discourse rights in conflicts. Although the four interviewed elderly individuals expressed understanding towards the erroneous behaviors of the elderly in conflict scenarios, they also acknowledged some degree of fault on the part of the elderly.

Regarding the pragmatic awareness of participants in family conflicts, the following characteristics emerge. Firstly, the elderly show a mild acknowledgment, with the highest mean value of 3.29, towards accusatory discourse from younger generations as a form of impoliteness. Secondly, they express a mild acknowledgment (mean value of 3.08) of the relationship between accusatory discourse from younger generations and damage to personal face. Lastly, the elderly exhibit a high degree of confidence in the parent-child relationship, with the lowest mean value of 2.06, believing that adopting conflict resolution strategies in response would not harm their relationship. Bousfield (2008) suggests that individuals, when faced with impolite behavior, may fall into two categories: acceptance or counterattack. In this study, Chinese elderly individuals demonstrate characteristics of counterattack in pragmatic awareness. On a rational level, they do not accept impolite behavior from their sons, believing that such behavior would harm their personal face. However, their counterattacks are not perceived as causing deterioration in the parent-child relationship.

Dragojevic et al. (2015) propose that communicators tend to carry a predisposition influenced by past interactions, bringing their evaluations of the communication characteristics of the other party and their willingness to maintain positive interpersonal relationships into communication. For the elderly, who have experienced various interactions in their past life development, they may have once directed similar accusations towards their own parents. When facing accusations from younger generations, they exhibit greater tolerance and understanding. Additionally, as elders within the family, traditional moral ethics require them to bear more responsibility and obligation to uphold family unity and stability, rather than exacerbate conflicts. Consequently, the pragmatic awareness and verbal behavior of Chinese elderly individuals in family intergenerational conflicts display contradictory characteristics, wherein they possess awareness of preserving personal positive face in conflicts but lack proactive behavior in maintaining personal face.

4.1 Contextual Disparities in Pragmatic Awareness and Conflict Strategies

This section primarily investigates whether there are differences in conflict resolution strategies and pragmatic awareness among the elderly in various conflict scenarios. The researcher employed conflict scenarios as the independent variable and conflict resolution strategies as well as pragmatic awareness as dependent variables, conducting a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Relevant data is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Analysis of Variance on Differences in Conflict Scenarios Regarding Conflict Resolution Strategies and Pragmatic Awareness

		N	Mean Value	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	F	Significance	Post Hoc Test
Material Conflict	Material	128	2.94	1.148	.102	7.975*	.000	Material > Emotion
	Emotion	128	2.46	0.979	.087			
Individual Face	Material	128	3.81	.811	.072	46.728*	.000	Material > Emotion
	Emotion	128	2.78	1.157	.102			
Impoliteness	Material	128	3.88	.931	.082	25.793*	.000	Material > Emotion
	Emotion	128	3.19	1.018	.090			
Interpersonal Relationship	Material	128	2.38	1.223	.108	12.484*	.000	Material > Emotion
	Emotion	128	2.06	.903	.080			

Table 3 indicates that conflict scenarios significantly impact the elderly's utilization of conflict resolution strategies and pragmatic awareness, with significant differences observed in both conflict resolution strategies and pragmatic awareness between the two conflict scenarios.

Overall, the elderly exhibit higher levels of conflict resolution strategy utilization and pragmatic awareness in material conflict scenarios compared to emotional conflict scenarios. Lai (2011) suggests that communicators do not use conflictual discourse solely to create conflicts but as a result of language choices to achieve communicative intentions, demonstrating features of linguistic adaptability. The findings of this study align with this perspective, indicating that the elderly's choice of conflict resolution strategies aligns with the semantic characteristics of the conflict scenarios. When facing material conflicts, their conflict perception and utilization of conflict resolution strategies are more intense, potentially contributing to a conflict spiral in interpersonal relationship management.

Zhao and Zhang (2005) argue that the root cause behind verbal conflicts is a lack of relevance, and relevance is built upon mutual understanding. The intensified conflict within the "elderly-adult children" relationship in material conflict scenarios is attributed to insufficient mutual understanding between the two generational groups concerning contemporary parent-child relationships. The traditional Chinese parent-child relationship is characterized by intergenerational exchange, with parents nurturing children and children providing for parents, placing the focus of the parent-child relationship towards the older generation (Wu & Sun, 2003). However, societal changes, including shifts in family structures and the waning influence of traditional concepts such as filial piety, ethical order, and overall family interests, have led to a diminishing emphasis on the older generation. Some younger individuals, encouraged by family and societal norms, not only loosen their self-awareness but also feel entitled to receive abundant material resources from their parents without reciprocating emotional or life-related support (Shen, 2010). In response, some elderly individuals are changing traditional caregiving perspectives, attempting to accumulate material wealth to secure their own later years, rather than relying entirely on their children's support. In this context, the elderly demonstrate a stronger willingness and motivation to preserve their face and safeguard their interests when faced with material conflicts. Interview results also indicate that elderly individuals are reluctant to share their financial status with their children and resist interference in their financial consumption. Some elderly individuals even express a preference for moving to nursing homes if their financial situation allows.

Wang (2008) posits that intergenerational exchanges in Chinese society between adult children and elderly parents primarily involve non-material factors such as emotions, with little interdependence in daily life and material aspects. This study's findings revise this perspective, indicating that with the transformation of intergenerational exchange patterns, material conflicts have replaced emotional conflicts as the primary contradiction in the "elderly-adult children" intergenerational relationship in the new era.

4.2 Relationship between Pragmatic Awareness and Conflict Strategies under Contextual Disparities

This section intricately investigates the nexus between pragmatic awareness and the application of conflict strategies in diverse conflict situations. Pearson's two-tailed tests underscore noteworthy correlations, particularly in scenarios characterized by material conflicts. Herein, there exists a moderate correlation between perceived rudeness and the utilization of conflict strategies ($r=0.346, p<0.01$). Additionally, mild correlations are discerned between personal face loss, damage to interpersonal relationships, and the deployment of conflict strategies ($r=0.326, p<0.01$; $r=0.196, p<0.01$, respectively). In the context of emotional conflicts, a mild correlation is observed between perceived rudeness and conflict strategy usage ($r=0.229, p<0.01$). Notably, a substantial correlation is evident between personal face loss, interpersonal relationship damage, and the adoption of conflict strategies ($r=0.708, p<0.01$; $r=0.867, p<0.01$, respectively). Overall, the intricate interplay between pragmatic awareness and conflict strategy deployment appears more accentuated in emotional conflicts.

To further ascertain the nuanced relationship between pragmatic awareness and conflict strategy utilization, the researchers conducted a meticulous stepwise multiple linear regression analysis. Leveraging the three facets of pragmatic awareness as dependent variables and conflict strategy deployment as the independent variable, this analysis sought to delineate the individual impact and contribution of pragmatic awareness factors on conflict strategy application. The outcomes of the forced regression underscore statistical significance in the model for material conflicts ($R^2=0.170, F=8.491, sig.<0.05$). This implies that pragmatic awareness plays a predictive role in conflict strategy deployment in material conflicts, albeit with a relatively modest fit, elucidating merely 17% of the variance. Within this model, the influence of rudeness damage emerges as most substantial (Beta = 0.264), followed by interpersonal relationship damage (Beta = 0.182). In the realm of emotional conflicts, the model attains statistical significance as well ($R^2=0.870, F=227.105, sig.<0.05$), showcasing heightened predictive efficacy, with pragmatic awareness elucidating 87% of the variance in conflict strategy deployment. Noteworthy within this model is the paramount impact of interpersonal relationship damage (Beta = 0.687), closely succeeded by personal face loss (Beta = 0.395). Refer to Table 4 for detailed data.

Table 4 The Regression Analysis of the Influence of Pragmatic Awareness on Conflict Resolution Strategies in Different Conflict Scenarios

Model		Unstandardized regression coefficient		Beta	t	Sig.
		B	standard deviation	version		
Material Conflict	(constant)	.551	.495		1.114	.267
	Individual Face	.188	.153	.133	1.230	.221
	Impoliteness	.326	.132	.264	2.470*	.015
	Interpersonal Relationships	.171	.078	.182	2.185*	.031
Emotion Conflict	(constant)	.058	.121		.480	.632
	Individual Face	.334	.032	.395	10.487*	.000
	Impoliteness	-.020	.033	-.021	-.609	.544
	Interpersonal Relationships	.745	.040	.687	18.748*	.000

Based on the two statistical methods mentioned above, the following conclusions can be drawn:

There exists a varying degree of association between the linguistic awareness and the use of conflict strategies among the elderly in family intergenerational conflicts, but the strength of this association is influenced by the conflict context. This aligns with Xiao's (2015) ecological context perspective, emphasizing the examination of the potential effects of internal and external contextual factors on specific behaviors from the perspectives of interactive synergy and overall correlation. Combining the results of this study, it can be observed that the elderly's use of conflict strategies in family intergenerational conflicts is a result of the collaborative interaction between external objective context (conflict situations) and internal subjective context (linguistic awareness). They engage in rational thinking to interpret and understand different conflict situations, subsequently choosing communication strategies they perceive as suitable.

Overall, the predictive power of linguistic awareness on the use of conflict strategies is stronger in emotional conflicts than in material conflicts. This can be interpreted from two perspectives: the context's priming effect and individual rational cognition. The priming effect posits that the essence of context priming is to establish associations between individuals and various contextual variables, thereby mutually activating and co-influencing each other (Giora, 2003). In the context of this study, emotional conflicts exhibit a more pronounced priming effect on linguistic awareness and the use of conflict strategies. This is because emotional conflicts, relative to material conflicts, are often reconcilable, providing the elderly with greater flexibility in managing parent-child relationships within the family. Regarding rational cognition, individual cognitive differences do not necessarily lead to conflict discourse since these differences are only a necessary condition, not a sufficient one. Whether conflict discourse occurs fundamentally depends on whether communicators can approach conflicts rationally (Zhang, 2019). This explains why the predictive power of linguistic awareness on conflict perception is lower in emotional situations than in material situations, as seen in Table 3 data.

Specifically, the three factors of linguistic awareness have varying degrees of influence on the use of conflict strategies in different conflict situations. Damage to personal face predicts the use of conflict strategies only in emotional conflicts. Perceptions of impoliteness predict the use of conflict strategies only in material conflicts. The belief that interpersonal relationships will not be harmed predicts the use of conflict strategies in both emotional and material conflicts. Yang (2013) argued that communicators, although engaging in communication with rational thinking, may experience communication obstacles at times, leading to a lapse in rationality. Based on the findings of this study, the alignment between the linguistic awareness of the elderly and the collaborative principles of conflict strategy use in different conflict situations is inconsistent. In a certain sense, this can be viewed as a form of rational bias (or emphasis). From the interview results, some elderly individuals believe that the challenges posed by their offspring's conflict discourse in emotional contexts undermine their role as elders in the family. Therefore, they need to emphasize their personal face during rational cognition.

In material conflicts, the elderly see their offspring's conflict discourse as a challenge to traditional moral order, leading them to be more inclined to perceive impolite behavior in communication as an ethical violation. However, this rational emphasis is premised on the assumption that the response to conflict strategies will not damage the parent-child relationship, as reflected in this study where the elderly believe that conflicting conflicts will not harm intergenerational relationships (see Table 2). Li & Laviosa (2011) argued that communicators, while participating in communication with rational thinking, are not merely exchanging accurate, effective, and appropriate information; instead, they are constructing and exploring meanings, constructing and exploring personal and social identities. The findings of this study support this viewpoint, indicating that communication is a complex social practice, and the interpretation of communicative behaviors requires the integration of social context and cognitive context clues.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the issues pertaining to pragmatic awareness and communication strategy utilization among elderly individuals in inter-generational family conflicts. The findings can be summarized in three key points: Chinese elderly individuals demonstrate an awareness of preserving personal positive face in inter-generational family conflicts, yet their proactive efforts in upholding personal face are lacking. The utilization of conflict strategies by the elderly aligns with the semantic features of the conflict situation, particularly intensifying in material conflicts. Moreover, the pragmatic awareness of elderly individuals in inter-generational family conflicts exhibits diverse regression effects on the selection of conflict strategies, with the impact contingent upon the specific context of the conflict.

Currently, there is a growing scholarly attention to the linguistic aspects of elderly individuals' lives within family environments, although related research is still in its early stages. The theoretical significance of this study lies in integrating social context and cognitive rationality into the examination of elderly individuals' linguistic lives within the family. It explores the interactive mechanisms between communicative agents (pragmatic awareness) and social environments (conflict situations) during conflict processes. The study highlights the correlated and synergistic roles of environment, cognition, and behaviour, providing new evidence from an ecological perspective on the communicative characteristics of elderly individuals in inter-generational family conflicts in the contemporary era. The results suggest that the utilization of conflict strategies by elderly individuals is a complex cognitive process, resulting from the synergistic interaction of internal cognitive factors and external environmental factors. This finding takes a small step forward from the perspective of the ecological context of subject-object interaction, offering a new explanatory framework for current research on the linguistic lives of elderly individuals in family environments and enriching existing research content in interpersonal pragmatics within the Chinese context. In practical terms, this study inspires awareness in inter-generational communication within families, contributing to the adaptive reconstruction of harmonious linguistic lives for elderly individuals. Recognizing and understanding the thinking and communicative characteristics of the older generation by the younger generation is crucial for achieving rational negotiation and harmonious interaction, ultimately contributing to the cultivation of "respecting the elderly" inter-generational relationships within families.

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