

Social relationships & language discourse: The influence of friendship & personality on meaning negotiation among international students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of friendship and personality on meaning negotiation among international students. It was conducted with three students from different countries who are studying at University of Birmingham, the United Kingdom. The qualitative method was applied, focused on a case study. Two conversations among three students with different level of acquaintances were analysed in terms of types of meaning negotiation. Through both quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the findings show that friendship and personality have the impact on meaning negotiation in terms of types, the willingness to negotiate and show emotion, the confidence to start a new point in the conversations, and the register of language during the negotiation process.

Key words: *influence, friendship, personality, meaning negotiation*

1. INTRODUCTION

It is widely believed that social relationship is an essential part of human life. Kurtus [1] reports that a major part of human life concerns their relationships and dealing with other people. Also, he concludes that 'the fulfillment in the social interactions can contribute to leading a satisfying and successful life'. As a result, a belief about the link between social relationships and language discourse is formed. However, it is likely to be vague to discuss the two umbrella terms: social relationships and language discourse. Therefore, only one segment of each term is examined in this current study: friendship and meaning negotiation. This study will look at how friendship, with the combination of personality, influences international students' meaning negotiation in their conversations.

Therefore, personality traits can be recognized through conversations. Mairesse [2] supports this view by showing the result in his study, that is, personality affects linguistic production. He finds that personality traits can be seen in both conversation and text. Personality traits are divided into five categories:

- Extraversion vs. Introversion (sociable, assertive, playful vs. aloof, reserved, shy)
- Emotional stability vs. Neuroticism (calm, unemotional vs. insecure, anxious)
- Agreeableness vs. Disagreeable (friendly, cooperative vs. antagonistic, fault-finding)
- Conscientiousness vs. Unconscientious (self-disciplined, organized vs. inefficient, careless)
- Openness to experience (intellectual, insightful vs. shallow, unimaginative)

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Personality

Personality is a complex of behavioral, temperamental, emotional, and mental attributes. For Kurtus [1], personality is one of the most basic and distinctive features among humans.

This is the background for the researcher to deliver the personality test to the participants. Contributing to the topic of personality, Ockey [3] investigates the influence of personal characteristics on oral test results. His research shows that the test takers' personalities affect

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others' oral scores due to the degree of the attractiveness of the oral test topics promoted by test takers. To enrich and confirm the impact of personality, Batinic et al [4] focus on media preferences. For him, a personality which is mostly assessed by 'extraversion' and 'neuroticism' decides the choices of communication media or levels of media richness such as face-to-face conversations or emails. From the previous research, this study is going to investigate the influence of personality with another direction: meaning negotiation.

2.2. Friendship

Friendship is defined as 'closeness between people' [5]. Friendship is believed to promote the productivity of working due to mutual understanding. Therefore, Nishihara et al [5] report that from the conversations recorded, the hierarchy of friendship can be estimated. This process can be done with the help of analyzing verb tenses and sentence types. Another similar study was done by McDonald et al [6]. The estimation of friendship was made by coding and analyzing the gossip. In addition, referring to the link between social relationship and conversation, Kong [7] examined the negotiation of participants in conversation among two groups: children with siblings and children with friends. He shows the remarkable difference between those two, that is, interaction in the first group is much more successful than that in the second one because of more understanding. This directly links to the current study: the impact of the closeness between people. From the empirical data, the researcher's belief on the influence of friendship in conversations was formed.

2.3. Meaning negotiation

Meaning negotiation plays an important role in conversational interactions. It is 'interaction between speakers who adjust their speech and use other techniques to repair a breakdown in communication' [8]. In the revised version of Interaction Hypothesis [8], meaning negotiation occurs if there are some difficulties in communication. Therefore, meaning negotiation is considered the chance for language de-

velopment. This point is proved in Dobao's study [9] which claims that meaning negotiation is of communication strategy. She divides meaning negotiation into two types of strategies: avoidance and achievement. The first type includes topic and semantic avoidance, message abandonment and message reduction. The second type has paraphrase, conscious transfer, appeals for assistance, and mine.

In addition, meaning negotiation is also understood as a conversational modification. The conversational modifications include comprehension checks, clarification requests, self-repetition, or paraphrase. However, for Eckerth [10], those elements are seen as comprehensible input. Eckerth [11] reported that modified output is 'utterances which were semantically, morphologically, syntactically, or phonologically altered in response to a negotiation move'. This point is in agreement with Mackey [6] which defines meaning negotiation as feedback, modified input or output. This is very interesting because it seems that meaning negotiation is understood in a Broadway. As a result, there is a wonder and curiosity about the dominance of which aspects in meaning negotiation that may occur with the influence of friendship and personality.

Eckerth [10] conducted a study at an L2 German university course in Great Britain. The research focused on the effect of participant structures on task-based interactional behavior. The measurement of meaning negotiation was done by counting the frequency and the appearance of negotiation moves across the tasks and dyads. The result of his study confirmed the finding of the previous research showing the balance of meaning negotiation moves and distribution of turns in small learner groups. This is the motivation for the researcher to check the balance of meaning negotiation with the influence of other two factors: friendship and personality.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Context

In communication, meaning negotiation is an

important strategy for mutual understanding. With international students, the role of meaning negotiation is strongly focused as speakers come from many different countries, leading in different 'types' of English. With the experience as a current learner in an international class, the researcher has involved in a variety of conversations which contain meaning negotiation. The time and the success of that process were sometimes affected by speakers' personalities and acquaintances. This motivates the researcher to do an investigation in the influence of friendship and personality on meaning negotiation among international students at the University of Birmingham.

3.2. Research questions

How do friendship and personality affect meaning negotiation among international students at the University of Birmingham?

3.3. Participants

There are three participants in this study. All of them are female and from 23 to 30 years old. They were students at the time of the survey. Participant A is from Taiwan. Participant B is from Vietnam. Both are students at the School of Education. Participant C is from China, a student at the College of Arts and Laws, English Department.

A and B have not known each other before whereas C and A have been friends for seven months. A and C met each other at the pre-session course. B is a newcomer of the University of Birmingham. She has just finished her master's degree in Cambridge for three months. A is assumed to be quiet and shy while C is believed to be very active and self-confident. However, B is perhaps even much more active and self-confident than C. Among three participants, A is the oldest. In contrast, B is the youngest.

Table 1. *Participants in this study*

Participant	Background	Subject	First language
A	M.A	TEFL	Taiwanese
B	Ph.D	International Studies	Vietnamese
C	M.A	Applied Linguistic	Chinese

3.4. Methods

Demitriou [11] claims that one of the most distinctive characteristics of a case study is that it allows for a flexible approach to the social process under analysis. For Robson [12], he describes a case study as a single 'case', or a small number of related cases both of which contain the development of detailed and intensive knowledge. Moreover, Robert Yin [13] defines a case study as a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context using multiple sources of evidence. In TESOL, a case study is usually about a classroom situation in a language school. From all the above definition, a case study suits this current study the best because of the investigation of a small number of participants about a specific topic and is characterized by audio recording and semi-structure interviews.

3.5. Instruments

3.5.1. The dyadic tasks

Before doing the dyadic task, all those participants did the personality test to check the assumption about their personality. The test is provided by the website www.learnMyself.com. The participants did this test online. The test focuses on five criteria: neuroticism, extra-version, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. It has 60 questions in the multiple-choice form. However, this study emphasizes extra-version, openness to experience and agreeableness because they reflect the assumption of the participants' personalities the most clearly. After that, participant A talked to B, and then A talked to C about the identical topics. There are two main reasons for requesting the participants to talk just about Christmas. First, talking about the same topic in two conversations is important to make a comparison of the categories of meaning

negotiations. Second, at the time of the interviews, Christmas was coming very soon, so it was more natural for the participants to talk to each other, reducing the feeling of acting a conversation for research. The topics were about Christmas activities and participants' feelings about the party on that day. Each conversation lasted about 10 minutes.

3.5.2. Transcription and coding

At first, the transcript of the two audio-recorded conversations was made. Later, the conversation analysis was applied to code the content of the conversations into types of meaning negotiation.

3.5.3. Self-evaluation

The next step was the participants' evaluation on the validity and reliability of the personality test they did.

3.5.4. Stimulated recall

In the stimulated recall, the participants gave more explanations and clarifications for what they had been said. Some follow-up questions were used to clarify their opinions.

3.6. Data analysis procedure

The three participants did the personality test online, and they forwarded the results to the researcher's email address. The two conversations were recorded in C's flat at university accommodation. The conversations happened after the Christmas party finished. Three days later, the participants attended the stimulated recall. The researcher came to their private accommodation and played the conversations for them to listen again before doing the interviews. The appearance of meaning negotiation types in the two conversations was counted to compare and examine the differences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. The personality test

According to the test, B is the most active and dynamic. Her scores out of 100 for Extraversion (E), Openness to experience (OE) and Agreeableness (A) are 48, 86 and 96 respectively. In

contrast, A is as dynamic as C in general. Both of them have the same score for E, 48. However, they differ in the last two elements. C has higher score for O (38), but A has higher score for A (63). In average, their scores are 77 for B, 47 for A and 31 for C (**Figure 1**).

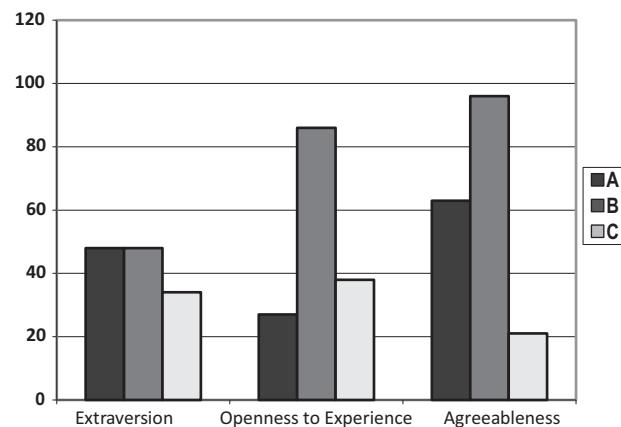


Figure 1. The personality test result

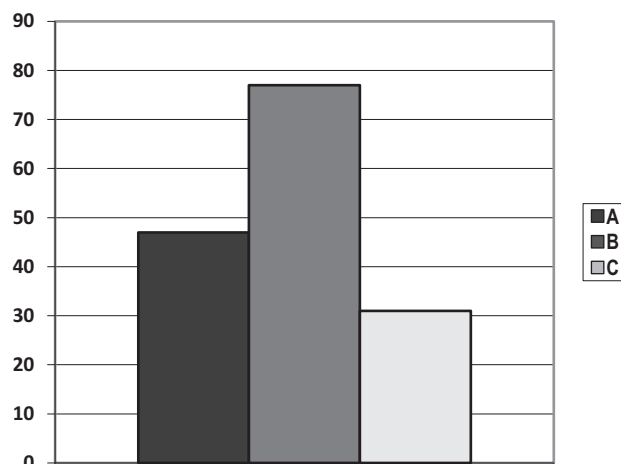


Figure 2. The average scales of activeness and dynamic

That result was a little bit different from the researcher's expectation because basing on the willingness to communicate during the classes, C was assumed to be more active and dynamic than A. This is the description summary about their personalities from the test:

'A is easy to feel panic or confused due to stress. She is not prone to spell of energetic high spirits. She tends to be shy and quiet because of lacking self-confidence. In fact, she is rather easily motivated. She is tender-hearted and compassionate and feels uncomfortable if being asked too much'.

'B prefers facts over fantasy and is more interested in what is happening in the real world. Although she is brilliant, she does not like to claim

that she is better than other people, and generally shy from talking herself up. She is easy going'.

'C does not feel nervous in social situations. She tends to feel overwhelmed by, and therefore actively avoids, large crowds. She tends not to express her emotions openly and is sometimes not even aware of her own feelings. She does not often talk herself up much. She believes that a certain amount of deception in social relationships is necessary'.

When being asked about the validity and reliability of the personality test, all of the three participants were very pleased with the results, especially B and C. A was a little bit surprised with some new description about her personality. She said: 'I usually feel panic all the time, but I don't know why. Now, I have the answer. Maybe, I'm under much stress.'

The result of the personality test is the background to examine the influence of personality on meaning negotiation in the next step.

4.2. The influence of friendship and personality on meaning negotiation

4.2.1. The types

16 types of meaning negotiation were tracked in this study, and 10 were found in conversation 1 (C1). In conversation 2 (C2), 11 types were used.

Information questions

An information question, also known as a genuine or referential one, is used for asking the information which the asker does not know the answer in advance [8]. It is used as a technique to achieve better understanding as Lightbown [8] defines. Therefore, the influence of friendship shows clearly in this type.

Table 2. Types of meaning negotiation

Types of meaning negotiation	C1	C2
Information questions	5	9

As being seen, in comparison with C1, the number of information questions in C2 is nearly twofold. This can be explained because when talking to a complete stranger, information questions would be raised as much as possible to break the ice between the two interlocutors. An

argument may be emerged that the more acquainted the interlocutors are, the more information questions are asked. However, in this context, the interlocutors in C1 have been friends in the UK for 7 months, so there is no ice between them to break. Moreover, all of the basic information about life of international students was exchanged during that time. As a result, they have the tendency to ask about general activity such as Christmas activities and religion in China instead of focusing on personal one.

C1: '10-Do you open... uh... uh... have.... have... Xmas party uh.. in your country?

16-Yeah... do they... have.... religious.... belief?'

However, in C2, the style was opposite as most of the questions are personal, targeting at the speaker. This is the influence of acquaintances because both of the interlocutors needed to find some cues of each other identities to achieve better mutual understanding.

C2: '3-A: With friends?

10-A: Yeah, so... Will you go there?

18-A: Why? Where will you go?

28-A: Oh... so. Will you visit your friend?

30-A: Oh. How many friends do you have there?

36-A: Ah, I see... Okay. So, how many days will you stay there?

38-A: Okay, so what do you think about the Xmas Market?

65-B: So, if you were her, would you buy it?'

Table 3. Clarification requests and confirmation checks

Types of meaning negotiation	C1	C2
Clarification requests	3	13
Confirmation checks	5	12

Clarification requests and confirmation checks are made when the interlocutors would like some information to be more explained because of the vagueness. Like the previous part, this one has the great difference in the frequency of meaning negotiation. In both types, C2 considerably dominates C1. I strongly believe that this is the influence of friendship because speakers in C1 have been friends for a long time; they are both clear about what their partners are referring to. Even sometimes can they understand each other without their partners' saying:

'51-C: Did you think you will return to Taiwan this

Christmas?

52-A: Yeah....I....I.....I..... don't know how to say, I suddenly forget. How to say...?

53-C: Plan?

54-A: Yeah.., plan....yes, (Laughing....but I changed my mind because I'll go back home maybe... back to Taiwan in...'

In that situation, if C were not acquainted with A for a long time, she would not guess the word 'plan' immediately because there is no clue from the beginning of the utterance. Another influence of friendship that can be seen is the purpose implied in these clarification requests and confirmation checks:

'59-C: Supervisor?

60-A: Ah. Ah... yes...

61-C: Oh, now you have a supervisor?

62-A: Yes.

63-C: My God!

64-A: Yes, we have supervisor and we're going to submit proposal.

65-C: Ah...ha, now I know why someone said School of Education is another world...

66-A: What do you mean? You mean it's strange?

67-C: No, no, it's so different because I'll submit proposal at the end of March.'

In that dialogue, due to the very close relationship, C raised the questions not to require the more explanation from A. She only wanted to express her emotion which was her surprise with the facts she heard. This really contrasts to that in C2 as most of the questions were asked needed real answers or explanations: '1-B: You said that you were ready for the Xmas market, right?

5-B: Ah, you mean you have a lot of things to do?

14-A: Oh. So you didn't go with them?

16-A: Why? Why?

18-A: Why? Where will you go?

22-A: But, but why?

34-A: Oh, so you mean you dislike him, right?

55-B: You mean a traditional of British or Scottish?

69-B: Different? How different? I think it's the same...'

Table 4. Agreements, disagreements and affirmations

Types of meaning negotiation	C1	C2
Agreements	4	7
Disagreements	4	6
Affirmations	14	5

Those three elements are used to express interlocutors' opinions. Usually, they express by saying 'Yes', or 'Yeah' or 'No' before adding their opinions. In the first two elements, they are relatively similar because it is normal to reveal opinions about an issue no matter who they are talking with. However, in the last element, there is a considerable difference. Close friends tend to support each other more frequently than others, like in C1. In contrast, strange speakers seem to listen to their partners very carefully before approving. That can explain the small number and density of affirmation in C2: '55-B: You mean a traditional of British or Scottish?

56-es, yes, I think Scottish.

57-Is it a kind of skirt?

58-Yes, skirt.

59-Ah, I know. It's a Scottish man toy.

60-Yes, maybe. You know, it's very small, but costs 8 pounds. So my flatmates asked her why she bought it, and she said because it has a special...special... how to say?

61-Do you want to say it has something to make it move? Is that right?

62-Yes, yes, right. Just add a function for much money for a toy.'

Table 5. Topic avoidance and semantic avoidance

Types of meaning negotiation	C1	C2
Topic avoidance	1	0
Message abandonment	0	1
Semantic avoidance	1	2
Message reduction	0	1

According to Dobao [9], those types happened when some difficulties in communication occur. In C1, it did not have message abandonment and reduction because base on the speakers' explanations, they are very close friends, they do not need to 'talk about a concept but, feeling unable to continue or reduce their original message, report the same idea but with less precision and detail' [9]. Their opinion can be expressed openly. This is different from speakers in C2:

'61-B: Do you want to say it has something to make it move? Is that right?

62-Yes, yes, right. Just add a function for much

money for a toy...

63-So you implied that it's not worth for that money, right?

64-Laughing. Everyone has specific interest...'

In lines 62 and 64 A appeared to be careful expressing her opinion. A said that she was afraid her straightforward ideas might make B uncomfortable. Similarly, C1 has topic avoidance, but C2 does not because C explained: *'This is a sensitive topic. We all know about that, but some people don't like to talk about the truth...'*

'44-A: I can't imagine a lot of pre-sessional classmates come. Really...Because I... I supposed N doesn't come because I... I... maybe... maybe...

45-C: I think the reason she comes is R comes, so... I don't know...'

Table 6. Paraphrase and appeal for assistance

Types of meaning negotiation	C1	C2
Paraphrase	1	9
Appeal for assistance	1	4

For Dobao [9], paraphrase and appeal for assistance are techniques used when having lexical difficulties. As I said before, because of the close acquaintance, the interlocutors in C1 rarely used those two types because there was nothing new about them. Instead, due to the completely strange relationship, the speakers in C2 had to use those types a very frequently because there were several new issues about them although the discussed topic in C1 and C2 was identical.

'15-B: Ah... sorry, I meant that last week, I went there with them, but the thing is I will meet my friend...

43-B: Oh, I think it's very pricy. I mean, expensive...

50-A: Yes, you know. My flat mate went to Edinburg last week. At the Xmas market, she also bought a... a... a... how to say? A traditional British... how to say? I don't know how to explain.

54-A: No, no, not dog, not dog. I mean people, people wear traditional... traditional clothes...

60-A: Yes, maybe. You know, it's very small, but costs 8 pounds. So my flatmates asked her why

she bought it, and she said because it has a special...special... how to say?

61-B: Do you want to say it has something to make it move? Is that right?'

In that dialogue, because the speakers met at the first time, the information they mentioned was brand new with each other. Therefore, A had more problems talking about Christmas activities, e.g. describing an item at the Christmas market in Edinburg.

4.2.2. The willingness to negotiate and show emotion

If the first criterion tends to show the influence of friendship on meaning negotiation, the second one seems to reflect the impact of both friendship and personality. C1 has 65 times of meaning negotiation in 69 lines of utterances which accounts more than 90% of the conversation. In contrast, C2 has 80 times of meaning negotiation in 71 lines of utterances, accounting nearly 113% of the conversation. Moreover, emotion in C2 was shown more frequently (18) than that in C1 (5).

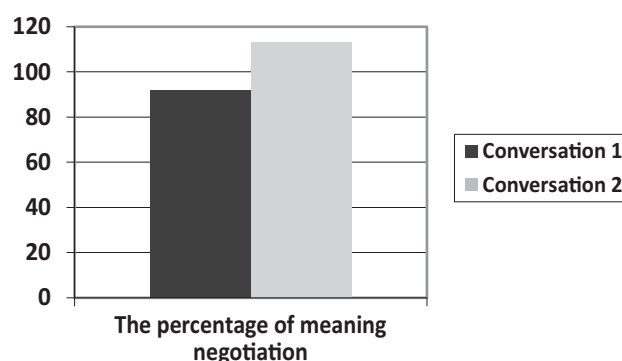


Figure 3. The willingness to negotiate and show emotion

A explained that C tended to retell her experience rather than to interact with A. As a result, A had to be the listener. She even felt hard to share her experience with C because of the nonstop talk from C. It decreased her willingness to negotiate; even some points were not understood or caught. However, A loved to talk with B as B was very patient, more active and humorous. This cleared the ice between

them and she felt close to negotiate with B. For C, she said she could stop talking about her life whenever she met her friends because she believed in them. For B, she revealed she usually listened carefully to A to 'diagnose' A's personality and interests. After that, realizing A was shy, she encouraged A to speak first and showed emotion, e.g. laughing 18 times, as much as possible to make A more confident. In short, friendship and personality decrease the willingness to negotiate and show emotion in C1, but increase that in C2.

4.2.3. The confidence to start a new point in the conversations

It is interesting that there was a relatively balance in this criterion (14-13). A explained that if friendship helped her to have confidence to start a new point in C1, B's personality encouraged her to do the same thing in C2. B was very friendly, understanding, patient and very open. All helped her felt eager to talk.

4.2.4. The register of language

There is no doubt that the more acquainted the interlocutors are, the more informal language is used. In C1, most of the utterances only contained key words whereas complete sentences were uttered in C2:

C1: '7-C: *Just the Xmas eve...*

11-C: *Not party...*

18-A: *Yes....just the same in Taiwan...*

22-A: *Just for fun...'*

C2: '1- B: *You said that you were ready for the Xmas market, right?*

5-Ah, *you mean you have a lot of things to do?*

13-*So the thing is it'll begin on Monday, so I'm afraid I can't go because...actually*

15-Ah...*sorry, I meant that last week, I went there with them, but the thing is I will meet my friend...'*

In short, this study has provided the proofs for the influence of friendship and personality in meaning negotiation. Its result seems to contrast Eckerth's [10] which confirms there is 'a balance of meaning negotiation moves and

distribution of turns in small learner groups'. The result of this study shows that with the influence of friendship and personality, meaning negotiation moves and distribution of turns tend to have a bias in the more acquaintance and open personality. Also, the result raises a concern with the study of McDonald et al [6] about evaluating the level of friendship through conversation because he may get difficulty assessing it in this study. However, this study confirms Okey's work [14], mentioning the influence of personality in speaking.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to the focus on language discourse analysis, the number of participants in this study is relatively small. In addition, three participants from three different cultures may have different ways of meaning negotiation.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has shown that friendship and personality have a strong impact on meaning negotiation. It also shows that language proficiency plays an important role in the success of meaning negotiation. The participants in this study had Advanced-Level of English, so they had the ability to maintain the flows of the conversations while negotiating meanings. Further research on a larger number of participants should be made to gain better understandings and insights. Hopefully, this study can help teachers to have different look at students' academic status in classes and give teachers a clue in classroom management.

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Quan hệ xã hội và diễn ngôn: Sự ảnh hưởng của tình bạn và tính cách trong điều chỉnh nghĩa lời nói giữa các sinh viên quốc tế

Nguyễn Thị Đan Tâm

TÓM TẮT

Bài báo này nghiên cứu về sự ảnh hưởng của tình bạn và tính cách trong việc điều chỉnh nghĩa lời nói giữa các sinh viên quốc tế. Bài nghiên cứu hiện tượng này giữa ba sinh viên từ ba nước khác nhau đang học tại Trường Đại học Birmingham, Vương quốc Anh. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu định tính, chú trọng vào nghiên cứu trường hợp. Hai cuộc đàm thoại giữa ba sinh viên với mức độ thân thiết khác nhau được phân tích dựa trên thể loại điều chỉnh nghĩa lời nói. Số liệu cho thấy tình bạn

và tính cách có ảnh hưởng đến sự điều chỉnh lời nói trên nhiều phương diện: thể loại, sự sẵn sàng để điều chỉnh nghĩa lời nói, sự biểu lộ cảm xúc, sự tự tin để bắt đầu cuộc trò chuyện mới và ngữ vực trong suốt quá trình điều chỉnh nghĩa lời nói.

Từ khóa: sự ảnh hưởng, tình bạn, tính cách, sự điều chỉnh lời nói

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