

Analysis of Language Functions in Interpersonal Communication in the English Visual Novel Game Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the language functions in the visual novel Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney by Shu Takumi using Jakobson's (1960) theory of language functions. This research employs a qualitative descriptive method to examine the data. Based on the analysis, the researchers identified four of the six language functions proposed by Jakobson within the visual novel. The most dominant language function found is the conative function, with the highest percentage of 24 instances (36.4%). The second most frequent is the referential function, which appears in 19 instances (28.8%). The emotive function ranks third, with 14 instances (21.2%). Lastly, the phatic function appears the least, with 9 instances (13.6%). These findings indicate that the conative function plays a central role in the visual novel, highlighting its focus on influencing the listener's actions or responses. The presence of other functions, such as referential, emotive, and phatic, also reflects the dynamic and interactive nature of the dialogue in Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney.

Keywords: Language Functions, Interpersonal Communication, Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney, Visual Novel

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the process of sending and receiving information from one person to another. Humans interact with others not only through face-to-face communication but also by creating data via the internet and published products, such as books and papers. Communication facilitates the distribution of knowledge and builds relationships between people. Communication is essential for humans because it helps in understanding each other's feelings and emotions and is defined as the process of understanding and sharing meaning (Pearson et al., 2017).

Interpersonal communication occurs when individuals interact in a way that maximizes personal presence and enables two-way communication. It involves close, irreplaceable relationships where people treat each other as unique individuals, creating their own terms and patterns, and impacting each other's lives. This type of communication is unique as it includes affinity, respect, immediacy, and control, enabling

individuals to achieve personal presence by effectively sending signals (Adler, du Pré, & Rodman, 2018).

Communication is also portrayed in films, dramas, and visual novel games. Visual novels, a popular sub-genre of games originating from Japan, have gained worldwide recognition. Initially released on PC and consoles like PlayStation and Xbox, visual novels have now expanded to mobile platforms with optimized file sizes. A visual novel is an adventure game featuring full-screen character images, backgrounds, background music, and sound effects that enhance scene transitions and interactions. Its unique feature lies in characters' ability to change facial expressions, voices, and convey emotions, adding depth to the storytelling experience.

In visual novel games, branching choices allow players to achieve interesting or unfavorable outcomes. The artwork is typically static, but characters are depicted with significant poses that accurately reflect reactions based on the situation. Text and visuals are enhanced with sound effects, background music, and, in some cases, voice acting, offering a rich audiovisual experience. As Lebowitz and Klug (2011) explain in *Interactive Storytelling for Video Games*, visual novels dramatize alternating storylines across scenes, with outcomes varying based on player choices. To fully navigate the game's interconnected challenges, players often replay the game multiple times, selecting different routes. This creates multiple perspectives in the diegetic construction, where elements are experienced through shifting character viewpoints. The branching narratives and diverse perspectives in visual novels contribute to the complex fictional adventures and situations they portray (Cavallaro, 2010).

In Japan, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* has achieved significant popularity. The first two games sold a combined 400,000 units on the Game Boy Advance and Nintendo DS, while the third game's Game Boy Advance version reached nearly 250,000 units. The fourth game sold 160,000 copies on its first day and totaled 250,000 units in its first week. Released in 2001, the game became a trilogy in 2014 under the same title. It follows Phoenix Wright (Ryuichi Naruhodo), a rookie attorney tasked with defending clients to prove their innocence. The main character navigates challenges in two settings: investigations and trials. During investigations, Phoenix communicates to gather information and evidence, while in court, he examines witnesses and responds to questions from judges, prosecutors, and witnesses.

Analyzing the language functions in interpersonal communication within the English visual novel game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* is essential for understanding how dialogue and interactions shape the narrative and player experience. By examining how language functions, we gain insight into how characters engage with each other, convey emotions, and influence the game's outcomes. This analysis not only enhances our appreciation of the game's storytelling but also provides valuable perspectives on how language functions in interactive media, enriching our understanding of both communication and digital storytelling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interpersonal communication is the process of exchanging messages to create meaning between at least two people in a setting that allows for speaking and listening. It includes interactions with strangers, vendors, friends, and family, conveyed through both verbal and nonverbal messages. Effective interpersonal communication fosters interaction and collaboration, which can be improved by being open, confident, supportive, and respectful. Relationships can be strengthened by enhancing interaction and cooperation among individuals.

Such communication includes four types: verbal, nonverbal, written, and visual. Verbal communication uses spoken language to convey intentional messages, whether in person or over the phone (Rocci & Saussure, 2016). Nonverbal communication relies on body language, facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and touch to express emotions or intentions without words (Burgoon, Manusov & Guerrero, 2021). Written communication involves the use of written words, such as emails and letters, to share information, offering the advantage of referencing without forgetting details (Pearson et al., 2010). Visual communication employs visual elements, such as images or graphics, to convey ideas, attitudes, and values effectively. Each of these types plays a crucial role in facilitating meaningful interactions (Machin, 2014).

It plays a vital role in creating meaningful connections between individuals, whether in everyday interactions or in more immersive environments such as video games. The analysis of interpersonal communication in games allows us to explore how characters interact with one another, conveying emotions, intentions, and relationships through various communication types—verbal, nonverbal, written, and visual. One such game sub-genre, the visual novel, uniquely presents these elements, offering players an interactive experience where communication shapes the narrative. In visual novels, players engage with characters through dialogue choices, facial expressions, and even written text, making interpersonal communication a core component of the gameplay and the overall storytelling experience. By analyzing communication within this context, we can better understand how these elements are used to enhance player immersion and emotional engagement.

Communication within the context of visual novels offers a unique environment where various forms of language—both verbal and nonverbal—serve to advance the narrative and deepen character development. By analyzing communication through Jakobson's language functions, we can gain a deeper understanding of how these forms of expression are utilized in visual novels. Jakobson's theory outlines six functions of language, including the referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic functions, all of which can be observed within the interactions between characters in visual novels. Referential function is focused on the context and the content of the message being communicated. It deals with the factual aspects of what is being said, such as statements like "The Earth is round," which convey objective information. Another important function is the emotive or expressive function, which is directed towards the sender. It reflects the emotions or attitudes of the speaker towards the message. This can

be seen in interjections such as "Wow!" or "Ouch!" which express surprise or discomfort, helping to convey the speaker's emotional state.

The conative or directive function is aimed at the receiver of the message. It seeks to prompt a specific response or action from the listener. This function is often present in imperatives, like "Could you lend me a hand?" where the speaker requests an action or response from the listener. In addition, the phatic function is essential for maintaining communication and ensuring that the conversation flows smoothly. It is used to establish or maintain contact, as seen in greetings such as "How are you?" or "Good evening," which serve to keep the conversation going and signal that the communication is ongoing.

The metalingual function involves clarifying the meaning of terms or concepts to ensure mutual understanding between the sender and receiver. This function is important when explaining or defining words, such as when someone asks, "What does that mean?" and the speaker provides further clarification. Finally, the poetic function focuses on the aesthetic qualities of language. It emphasizes the form and style of the message, often found in creative or poetic expressions. For example, "Tonight the moon shines high as if it were a diamond" uses vivid imagery and metaphors to make the message more impactful and meaningful. This function highlights the beauty and artistic expression of language.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research employs a descriptive qualitative methodology, focusing on the analysis of language functions in interpersonal communication within the visual novel game *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*. The research applies the observation and documentation techniques, using specific research instruments for data collection. These instruments include the researchers themselves, a screen recorder for documentation purposes, a steam account used to play the visual novel, and a table for categorizing and classifying the dialogues based on Jakobson's theory of language functions.

Steps in Data Collection:

1. **Playing and Observing:** The researchers carefully play *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, paying close attention to the interpersonal communication that occurs in the game. They observe the conversations between characters, ensuring they capture all relevant interactions in detail.
2. **Understanding and Analyzing Dialogues:** The researchers read through the dialogues in the game and analyze them to identify the different language functions present. They focus on understanding how these functions manifest within the communication, ensuring a comprehensive view of how Jakobson's language functions are applied in the game's narrative.
3. **Recording and Noting Dialogues:** During gameplay, the researchers take detailed notes of every conversation or dialogue that occurs. The dialogues are recorded accurately, and any interactions that contribute to the analysis of language functions are carefully documented.
4. **Classifying Dialogues Based on Language Functions:** Once the dialogues are collected, they are categorized according to Jakobson's six language functions: referential, emotive, conative, phatic, metalingual, and poetic. Each dialogue is

analyzed and classified based on its alignment with one or more of these functions, reflecting how the game uses language to communicate interpersonal dynamics.

5. Conclusion: After completing the classification, the researchers draw conclusions about the role of language functions in the interpersonal communication that takes place in *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*. This involves synthesizing the findings to determine how these functions shape character interactions and advance the game's narrative.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of language functions in this study focuses on the main character's utterances in the visual novel *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, Phoenix Wright, along with other supporting characters, namely Mia Fey, Winston Payne, Maya Fey, and Miles Edgeworth. A total of 60 data utterances containing language functions were found, ranging from scene 2 to scene 105. The researchers identified four out of the six language functions present in *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* based on Jakobson's theory: referential function, emotive function, conative function, and phatic function. The researcher did not find the metalingual and poetic functions in the visual novel, as the focus of the novel is on court trials and criminality, with no poetic language used by the characters. The most dominant language function in this visual novel is the conative function, with 24 utterances (36.4%). The next most frequent function is the referential function, with 19 utterances (28.8%). The third is the emotive function, with 14 utterances (21.2%), and lastly, the phatic function, with 9 utterances (13.6%).

a. Connative Function

As identified in Jakobson's theory of language functions, the conative function primarily focuses on the addressee and serves to influence, request, or instruct the listener to do something. Below, there are some utterances as data that are broken down and interpreted how these utterances reflect the dominant conative function in the game:

- "Um, Chief, what do I do now?"

This is an example of a direct request from Phoenix Wright to his superior. He is seeking instructions or guidance, which is a clear instance of the conative function, aiming to get a response or action from the Chief.

- "Uh... what exactly am I suppose to do?"

Similarly, this utterance portrays an inquiry to seek direction, reflecting a need for a reply or action, indicative of the conative function.

- "Are you sure it was a television and not... a radio?"

Here, Phoenix challenges the witness's testimony, questioning and prompting them to reconsider their statement. This is a form of persuasion, intended to provoke the addressee (the witness) into responding with a different or more accurate piece of information.

- "Just look at the witness's face!"

This command directs attention to the witness's facial expression, aiming to influence the addressee (probably the judge or jury) into evaluating the witness's demeanor, thus impacting the decision-making process.

- “Yeah, of course I will! Cheer up!”

Phoenix provides reassurance, encouraging the other character to feel better. This is a directive aimed at motivating the listener emotionally to calm down and feel more confident.

The dominance of the conative function in the Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney game reflects the highly interactive and directive nature of courtroom dynamics. Most of the utterances are aimed at prompting responses, gathering information, or directing others to take specific actions—whether in formal questioning, informal exchanges, or emotional appeals. The conative function is central to the gameplay as Phoenix Wright navigates through investigations and courtroom trials, constantly urging others to act or respond in ways that move the narrative forward. Through these various direct and indirect requests, Phoenix and the other characters actively shape the flow of the story, and their communication aligns closely with Jakobson's conative function, which emphasizes influencing the addressee.

b. Referential Function

The second dominant language function in the game Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney is referential function, which, according to Jakobson's theory, primarily focuses on conveying information, describing facts, or stating propositions that are meant to inform or explain the world as it is. It is primarily concerned with the context and is used to communicate objective information about people, events, or objects. This function is evident in statements that describe facts, present evidence, or provide explanations about the plot. In the case of Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney, many of the utterances above are examples of the referential function because they are intended to inform the listener (and the player) about key facts, pieces of evidence, or logical explanations. Below is several interpretations of how these utterances reflect the referential function.

- “Actually, it's because I owe him a favor. He's one of the reasons I became an attorney.”

This utterance provides factual background information about Phoenix Wright's motivation for becoming an attorney. It explains his personal connection to another character, offering crucial context for his actions and emotional investment in the case. This is a classic use of the referential function, offering insight into Phoenix's past and why he is involved in this particular case.

- “The prosecution has said there was a blackout at the time of the discovery! And this record proves it!”

This utterance presents factual information about the case: the claim of a blackout and the evidence that contradicts this claim. It serves to challenge a point in the

prosecution's argument by providing concrete proof, which is a clear example of the referential function, as it introduces new data to the conversation.

- “Wait just a moment! The murder weapon wasn't a clock. It was this statue!”

This statement is a factual correction, providing new information that directly challenges a previously established claim. Phoenix is offering an alternative explanation to the identity of the murder weapon, which is a classic example of the referential function—stating facts to clarify the situation.

- “The victim is the only person who absolutely could NOT have written it! This is a report from your department, Detective. 'Immediate death due to a blow from a blunt object.' She died immediately!”

This statement presents a key piece of evidence: a report that suggests the victim could not have written a note before her death. It provides crucial information, which directly aids in the investigation and builds Phoenix's argument. This is a direct application of the referential function to introduce factual evidence.

In *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, the referential function of language is used to convey facts, evidence, and logical reasoning, which are key to advancing the investigation and courtroom proceedings. The utterances presented provide objective information, such as details about the crime, evidence like autopsy reports and photographs, and explanations that clarify contradictions or support arguments. For example, statements like, "The prosecution has said there was a blackout at the time of the discovery! And this record proves it!" introduce critical factual information, while others, such as "A second autopsy was performed yesterday..." present new evidence that can change the course of the case. Overall, the referential function is central to developing the plot, as it helps to present and challenge facts that are essential to solving the mystery.

c. **Emotive Function**

The emotive function of language in *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* is primarily used to express emotions, feelings, and personal reactions of the characters. This function often manifests in moments of intensity, such as when characters react to events, accusations, or achievements in the investigation and trial. For example, utterances like, “You killed her, didn't you!” and “Thank you, Your Honor” express strong emotional responses, such as anger, relief, or gratitude. Statements like, "I owe it all to you" or “I'm impressed!” show gratitude and admiration, further underlining the emotional tone of the characters' relationships.

Additionally, utterances like “Whew, I'm glad I made it on time” and “I'm glad you made it. ... Thank you, Phoenix” reflect a sense of relief and appreciation, often signaling a moment of triumph or emotional connection. These emotional expressions are integral to the narrative, as they not only show how the characters feel but also contribute to the development of relationships and the dramatic tension of the storyline. The emotive function, thus, plays a key role in making

the dialogue more engaging and relatable, adding depth to the character's internal states and their interactions with others.

d. Phatic Function

The phatic function of language is primarily concerned with establishing, maintaining, or ending communication between the participants in a conversation. In *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, the phatic function is frequently used to manage social interaction, confirm attention, or initiate contact, without necessarily conveying deep meaning or information. The focus is more on maintaining the flow of the conversation and ensuring that communication is happening.

For instance, utterances like, "Oh, h-hiya, Chief," "Umm... Excuse me but, who are you?" and "Oh! It's you! The lawyer... G-good morning" are examples of initiating communication, signaling a greeting, or confirming identity. These statements serve to establish contact and initiate or maintain an interaction. Similarly, phrases like "Hold on just one second!" and "Your Honor, if I may...?" are used to gain the floor in the conversation, ensuring that the speaker has a chance to contribute, which is a key feature of the phatic function.

In the context of courtroom interactions, phatic expressions like "Not so fast, Mr. Sahwit!" and "Stop right there. The witness's opinion on the matter is irrelevant!" also function to direct the flow of the conversation, managing the exchange between characters and maintaining control of the legal discourse. These utterances serve to facilitate communication and signal attentiveness or intervention in the proceedings, ensuring that the dialogue remains effective.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research provides a comprehensive analysis of the language functions in the interpersonal communication within the visual novel *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney*, utilizing Jakobson's theory of language functions as the analytical framework. Through a detailed examination of 60 dialogue excerpts, the study identified and categorized four out of the six language functions: referential function, emotive function, conative function, and phatic function.

The conative function was found to be the most dominant, highlighting the persuasive and directive nature of communication within the game, where characters often seek to influence or direct the actions and responses of others, particularly in the courtroom setting. The referential function, which conveys information and facts, also played a significant role in advancing the narrative and legal arguments, with characters providing evidence, facts, and explanations crucial to the unfolding drama. The emotive function underscored the emotional depth of the characters, reflecting their feelings, reactions, and personal stakes in the case, thus enhancing the emotional engagement of the player. Finally, the phatic function was prevalent, ensuring smooth communication and interaction between characters, managing the flow of conversation, and maintaining the social connection essential to the game's dynamic.

The metalingual and poetic functions were notably absent in this particular visual novel, likely due to the genre's focus on legal drama and crime rather than abstract or poetic expression. This absence does not diminish the richness of communication within the game but rather reflects the genre's reliance on functional, practical discourse. The findings underscore how Jakobson's language functions can illuminate the diverse communicative strategies employed in a narrative-driven game, offering insights into both the mechanics of the game's dialogue and the complex interpersonal dynamics it portrays.

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