

# A Study on Confucius' Views on Language Functions

Qiao Liqing and Min Shangchao

## Abstract:

Confucius, one of the most important educationalists, thinkers and philosophers in the Chinese history, has great impacts on Chinese people's life and is gaining increasing popularity worldwide. A great number of researches into the thoughts of Confucius have been conducted at home and abroad, most of which are from the perspectives of philosophy, culture, religion, etc. But his views on language, especially on the role of language in social life, have not been paid due attention to. This paper aims to examine thoroughly Confucius' thoughts on language functions and make a comparison between Confucius' views on language functions and some western theories of language functions. We find that language functions mainly fall into three categories including communicative function, ethical function and political function. We also find that both Confucius and Western scholars share the view that language bears a close relationship with politics while they still hold some different opinions. Confucius places more emphasis on a higher and more specific level of language functions while western scholars focus more on the general and objective level.

**Keywords:** Confucius; views on language functions; communicative function; ethical function; political function

## 1. Introduction

Confucius, a great educationist and thinker, has an enormous impact on Chinese history. Confucianism, dominating various aspects of Chinese people's life, is regarded as the cornerstone of traditional Chinese culture. However, his views on language are not explicitly presented in his works. It is therefore necessary for us to probe into Confucius' views on language and summarize them systematically.

With regard to language, he has developed his own profound views. For instance, Confucius advocates that one's words should be in accordance with his actions. "The Master said: He acts before he speaks, and afterwards speaks according to his actions." (Pan, 1993) Furthermore, Confucius holds that language is closely related to politics because it can play a vital role in determining a country's fate as implied in his remark to the effect that one word can make a country prosperous or desolate. (see Pan, 1993)

Prior to the present research, few systematic studies have been available on Confucius' thoughts on language, in spite of its richness and profundity. What is more, studies on Confucius' views on language functions are few and far between. Aiming to bridge the gap, this study is carried out to present a comprehensive framework of Confucius' viewpoints on language functions.

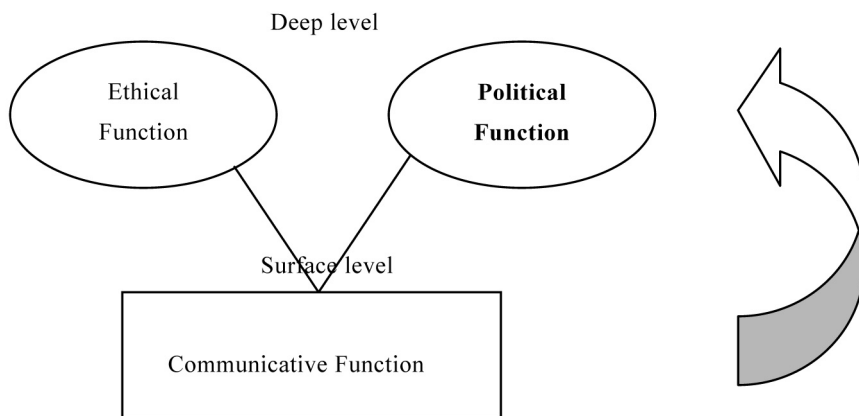
## 2. Review of Relevant Literature

Xia Lizhi (2006) conducted a comparative study on the views of language manifested by the Bible and the *Analects* and found out that they shared some similar reflections on the restrictiveness, regularity and limitation

of language while disparity also existed regarding the function and source of language. Zhong Zhiping (2004) maintains that Confucius' concept of speech appropriacy is a united system of content and form, including both content appropriacy and form appropriacy. The former means one knows how to submit his speech to the restraints of the ritual, the virtue and the honesty, and the latter refers to getting one's meaning understood, the ornamentation and the deliberation of speech. Wang Lei (2007) argues that Confucius attempted to achieve the unification of truth and virtue through advocacy of correct language. Li Kejian (2002) discusses Confucius' views on the basic rules and regulations concerning the content and form of language, putting forward the maxim of "words in accordance with actions", "to get through one's meaning" and "to speak in an appropriate time" and the like. Feng Jiaqian (2005) summarizes the key features of Confucius' views on language as follows: the emphasis on social functions of language, the initiation of correct language, the clarification of good attitudes in speaking and the establishment of the basic rules and specific regulations of language communication. Mao Ruyi (2006) analyzes Confucius' viewpoints on language, together with the connotation of benevolence (*ren*) and politeness (*li*) as well as their relationship.

### 3. This Study

In this paper, we will explore Confucius' views on language functions based on the *Analects of Confucius* and try to present a clear picture of his thoughts. In general, the system of Confucius' views on language can be illustrated by a V-shape model, at the bottom of which lies the communicative function (surface level) and at the top reside ethical and political functions (deep level). In the first part, communicative function of language is discussed in terms of mutual understanding and coordination. Then comes the second part about the ethical function of language from both positive and negative perspectives. The third part concerns the political function of language from both rulers' and civil citizens' standing. This is followed by the comparisons between Confucius' views on language and the western philosophy of language. Finally, Confucius' views on language functions will be presented systematically and comprehensively in the conclusion.



*Relationships between three functions of language*

### 3.1 Communicative Function

Language is the vehicle of culture and ideas, serving to facilitate people's mutual understanding and coordinate people's inter-relations. Language is indispensable to people's day-to-day exchanges.

#### 3.1.1 Language for mutual understanding

Language, as the distinctive feature of human beings, serves as a tool for communication which is vital to human life. The most direct and convenient way of conveying messages between human beings is undoubtedly through language. The proverb goes "words are the voice", indicating that language directly reflects one's personal inner world and thought. Language functions as a link of inner thought among people, which makes it possible for people to achieve mutual understanding and in turn maintain the normal operation of social life.

In view of the obstacles in communication posed by the diversity of language in terms of pronunciation, Confucius called for the consistence of words' pronunciation which he named "Ya Yan". The *Analects of Confucius* says, "The Master used the standard language when reading the Book of Poetry or the Book of History and when practicing the ritual acts." (Pan, 1993)

"Ya" refers to the region of Yellow River Basin, the center of politics, economy and culture of West Zhou dynasty. Classical writing records that people from all directions are confronted with language barrier. This situation had been normalized by the Spring and Autumn Period because exchanges and contacts between countries became so frequent that a common language emerged in the region. As a consequence, the dialect of the Yellow River Basin which facilitated the regional interaction was somewhat standardized. To its advantage, this dialect was promoted as a "common language", namely, "Ya Yan".

In addition, the *Analects of Confucius* introduces the view that "In speeches all that matters is to convey the meaning." (Pan, 1993) This viewpoint reveals that the essential role of speech lies in transmitting information in a clear way in order for the hearer to catch the meaning and that the life of speech is "expressiveness" which helps people achieve mutual understanding in the course of communication.

#### 3.1.2 Language for coordination

As a communicative tool, language is not only used to exchange information, but also to materialize and maintain a harmonious social relationship. Confucius was of the view that communication is for making friends and that making friends is for assisting the benevolent highness. In the belief that speech is designed to meet the like-minded, he contends that those who are like-minded are able to share common grounds to exchange ideas, while those who are not can not even argue with each other. Otherwise, how can harmony be achieved?

For the sake of smooth relationship, Confucius proposed the adoption of "clumsy word" while communicating with others. From the perspective of personal relationship, the use of superb language skills instead of "clumsy word" to gain the upper hand will, more often than not, lead to adverse consequences. This reminds us of the "doctrine of Mean" advocated by Confucius time and again. In speech contact, people are expected to be not too aggressive. It is said that Confucius himself talked to his students in a relaxing and benevolent way.

### 3.2 Ethical function

The *Analects of Confucius* expounded ethic norms in many ways and in particular reference to speech. According to Confucius, a man boasting the highest ethic can be called a gentleman, while a refined speech is one of the embodiments of the best ethic. As is said in the *Analects*, "For one word, a superior man may be set down as wise, and for one word he is deemed to be not wise." (Pan, 1993) A man's self-cultivation can be revealed through his speech. In this sense, Confucius implicitly pointed out the ethical function of language, indicating that fine language can show a man's cultivation.

### 3.2.1 Language obeying moral

“The Master said: Natural substance and ornamentation duly blended make a superior man.” (Pan, 1993)  
A gentleman who is morally cultivated tends to skillfully manipulate a speech in terms of its ornament and substance. We are likely to appreciate the literary grace and profound content conveyed in his speech. A man who can appropriately organize and deliver his speech can be considered as a gentleman; similarly, we can judge a gentleman in terms of the manner and substance of his speech. A refined and elegant speech fully reflected a man’s moral cultivation.

“The Master said: The superior man should be slow in words and earnest in deeds.” (Pan, 1993) He emphasizes the slowness and clumsiness of a gentleman’s speech. Confucius laid no less importance on slowness in speech than on strength, resoluteness and bluntness. He thought if a man possessed these four qualities, he was very close to a true gentleman. Confucius further elucidated this perspective in terms of “speechlessness”. According to Confucius, the action itself was able to illustrate one’s intention and ambition; therefore there was no need to spend rhetoric publicly.

Confucius took it as a shame to fail to keep one’s words; he was ashamed of those who could not keep their words, as shown in his sayings: “The ancients did not readily give utterance to their words. Because they would feel disgraceful if their actions did not come up to them” and “The superior man is ashamed to speak more and do less.”(Pan, 1993)

### 3.2.2 Language breaching moral

“The Master said: Honey words and flattering looks seldom speak of human-heartedness.”

“The Master said: Clever words, flattering looks and overdone humility-Zuo Qiuming was ashamed of them. I am also ashamed of them.”

“The Master said: Clever talk confounds virtue.”(Pan, 1993)

Confucius severely criticized the speech which violates the norm of morality and courtesy. The three quotations clearly display Confucius' approval of simplicity and expressiveness of ornamentation and disapproval of clever talk as manifested in his words “to get through one’s meaning”. Those who use clever talk usually speak false appraisal of their superiors in order to please and flatter them. In return, they may effortlessly reap promotion in their career despite their incompetence. Besides, the widespread and frequent use of clever talk during people’s daily exchanges is likely to undermine the moral climate of the society to the point that people may conceal their minds from and get dishonest to each other. From the above points of view, speech could exert no small side effect on the social moral standing.

## 3.3 Political function

Language, from Confucius’ perspectives, is not only the vehicle for communication and the embodiment of ethical values, but also, in a higher sense, serves as a tool employed by the governor to govern the country and by the populace to obtain official posts.

### 3.3.1 Language for ruling the country

Confucius maintained that the survival of a country, to a large extent, was determined by the use of language. The combination of language and the fate of a country in the *Analects of Confucius* indicates Confucius’ in-depth understanding on the political function and immense contribution of language.

“Duke Ding asked, Is there any one saying that can make a state prosperous?”

“Confucius answered, It cannot be said so simply. However, there is a saying which people have, ‘To be a

prince is difficult, to be a minister is not easy.' And did one know how difficult it is to be a prince, might not this one saying all but make a state prosperous?"

"The duke said, Is there any one saying that can ruin a state?"

"Confucius answered, It cannot be said so simply. However, there is a saying which people have, 'I have no pleasure in being a prince, only in that no one opposes what I say.' If a prince's words are right, and no one opposes them, is it not good? But if they are not right, and no one opposes them, might not this one saying all but ruin a state?" (Pan, 1993)

In this quotation, Confucius summarized the respective effects of "good phrase" and "bad phrase" on ruling a country. Whether a country will become prosperous or not largely depends on whether the King has got a clear understanding about his own position and the tremendous effect of language. Only if the King attaches great importance to his words and runs all the public affairs discretely, can he win the trust of all the citizens, which, in turn, facilitates the booming and prosperity of the country. Otherwise, all the citizens will rebel and the country will turn into a mess.

In another chapter of the *Analects of Confucius*, Confucius also gave expression to his dislike of "bad language" which subverted a kingdom. "The master said: I hate to see purple taking away the luster of red. I hate to see the songs of Zheng corrupting the count music. I hate those [who] with their sharp mouths overthrow kingdoms." (Pan, 1993)

### 3.3.2 Language as the requisite of running political affairs

"Zilu said, The prince of Wei has been waiting for you to govern, what shall you do first? The Master replied, The one thing needed first is the rectification of names."

"The Master said: If names are not right, what is said does not accord with the truth. When what is said does not accord with the truth, affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affairs cannot be carried on to success, rites and music do not flourish. When rites and music do not flourish, law and justice will fail. And when law and justice fail, the people do not know how to move hand or foot." (Pan, 1993)

From the above quoted dialogue between Confucius and Zi Lu, we know that the first thing that Confucius would do in the Kingdom of Wei was to correct the language, that is, to correct the abuse of names in administrative activities. Confucius held that "unjust names" would not only lead to "inappropriate words" and "unsuccessful activities" but also "not prosperous rites and music", "unfair reward and penalty" and even "people's going astray". In other words, "unjust names" would cause the foundation of administration to collapse. The proper wording is the requisite of governance.

### 3.3.3 Language for obtaining official posts and salary

"The Master said: "Hear much, remain silent to whatever you stand in doubt, and speak cautiously of the rest, then you will seldom fall into error. See much, put aside what you are doubtful about, and put the rest cautiously into practice, then you will seldom fall into repentance. If you seldom fall into error in your speech, and seldom fall into repentance in your conduct, you are likely to achieve official post and salary." (Pan, 1993)

Here, from the point of view of speech communication, Confucius makes the following three points: 1) We must listen before speaking; 2) Do not say anything that you are not sure about; 3) Be cautious even when talking about what you generally know. Only in this way can we make fewer mistakes. And only in this way can we get our reward, i.e., to get the official position and salary.

### 3.3.4 Language for survival from persecution

“The Master said, When the Way prevails in the state, be upright in speech and upright in action; when the Way does not prevail, be upright in action but modest in speech.” (Pan, 1993)

Confucius noted the close relationship between verbal communication and individuals’ survival from persecution. He pointed out that communicative language must change with the political environment. We should make adjustments accordingly when we speak. When the country’s political environment is amicable, we can speak honestly and conduct ourselves justly; when the country’s political environment is hostile, we can conduct ourselves justly but we need to be cautious in speech. If we ignore the “Way”, i.e., the changes in political environment, and speak whatever we want to at will, it will be harmful not only to the state but also to ourselves. Confucius had very deep knowledge about the relationship between communicative language and political environment. His understanding about the effect of language on politics was thorough and pertinent.

## 4. Comparisons

The role of language is universally discussed both at home and abroad. Various scholars from diversified fields have explored and issued different theories of their own about language. It is necessary for us to make a comparison between different theories in order that we can have a more profound and integrated understanding about the role of language. So far, we have analyzed Confucius’ views on language functions through analysis of relevant quotations from the *Analects of Confucius*. It is due time for us to draw a macro picture of both the similarities and differences between Confucius’ views on language and other major theories on language.

### 4.1 Similarity

The inseparability of ethics and politics in the Confucian texts reminds us of the Aristotelian approach to this issue. According to the *Analects*, Confucius was asked how he would begin if he was put in power of a country, and answered he would begin by establishing the correct usage of terminology, since the proper use of language and terms could secure order in the state. This is in line with Aristotle’s contention made in the *Politics* (Wu, 1998) that man is a political animal and the only animal enabled by the gift of speech to set forth the expedient and the inexpedient, the just and the unjust, where lies the very reason why men are able to establish much more advanced political organizations than other animals. Referring to the effect of language on politics, Confucius and Aristotle have reached a common consensus that language is a powerful tool for facilitating a political organization of human society.

### 4.2 Difference

Regarding the relations between speech and action, Confucius’ views differ from Austin’s speech act theory in that the former regards language as the manifestation of one’s self-cultivation while the latter regards language as a means of describing things or performing actions. To some extent, Confucius’ view on language can be taken as a high standard for ordinary people to achieve. If one wants to be a gentleman, he must pay more attention to the way he speaks and make sure that one’s actions justify his words. However, Austin’s Speech Act Theory classifies three types of acts: locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act (Thomas, 1995). He believes that language, rather than being a sign of one’s self-cultivation, is used to do things. One uses the language to get others to perform a specific action so as to bring about the changes to the state of the real world. In this sense, their views about language are quite different from each other.

## 5. Conclusion

It is concluded from our analysis that language functions as a tool for people to fulfill their purposes. Language is an indispensable medium in social life, through which people can accomplish their goals while observing the underlying principles. As found in the communicative function section, “Ya Yan” can facilitate people’s communication to achieve their mutual understanding. Also, as seen in the political function section, language can be employed to gain official post and reward. Furthermore, the ethical function section disclosed that a man’s moral cultivation can be fully reflected in his speech.

One noteworthy aspect is that language can be employed to keep the whole society in order, which is different from the Western views on language since Western philosophy of language maintains that language is used to perform actions, do things and accordingly change the world.

Another important finding lies in the fact that language serves as lubricant to smooth various relationships in order to achieve the ultimate goal of harmony, which is reflected throughout Confucius’ views on language. That is the precise context in which his advocacy of the use of clumsy words, instead of aggressive speech, should be interpreted.

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