

Exploring the Discourse Strategies and Culture of NBA Players in Media Interviews

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Abstract:

This study explores the discourse strategies employed by NBA players in media interviews and their underlying cultural logic. A qualitative case study of interview transcripts and videos identifies five primary strategies: polite formulas, humor/satire, the ‘cool pose’, silence/avoidance, and teammate defense. The findings suggest these are not merely linguistic tactics but are deeply embedded in the performance-driven nature of American sports media, the African American ‘cool pose’ cultural identity, and the tension between individualism and collectivism. This research offers insights into athlete image management, cross-cultural pragmatics, and public persona construction in professional sports.

Keywords:

NBA players, Media interviews, Discourse Strategies

1. Introduction

1.1. Background and Purpose

In the media-saturated landscape of the NBA, interviews are far more than routine information exchanges—they are strategic performances that directly shape players’ public image, brand value, and team reputation. Facing reporters immediately after intense competition, players must navigate a range of sensitive topics and expectations while maintaining a controversy-free persona. This demands the skillful and often instantaneous use of discourse strategies. This thesis investigates the discourse strategies employed by NBA players in media interviews and the cultural logic behind them. It identifies and analyzes key discursive tactics—such as politeness formulas, humor, avoidance, and teammate defense—and examines how they function to manage individual and collective images, negotiate power relations, and balance the dual demands of sports seriousness and media entertainment. The study further aims to reveal the cultural beliefs embedded in these language choices, thereby enriching Chinese English learners’ pragmatic awareness in high-stakes, cross-cultural communication contexts.

1.2. Method and Structure

The study adopts a qualitative case-study approach. Representative interview clips and transcripts are collected from platforms such as Bilibili and Hupu, and typical instances are selected to demonstrate and analyze the discourse strategies in action. This case analysis is complemented by a review of relevant theoretical literature in pragmatics and intercultural communication. The thesis is organized into six chapters, followed by a bibliography. Chapter 2 reviews existing scholarship on athlete discourse and outlines the theoretical frameworks employed. Chapter 3 describes the data sources and the principles of case selection. Chapter 4 presents the five core discourse strategies identified in the data, each illustrated with detailed examples. Chapter 5 explores the deeper cultural implications of these strategies, drawing on Erving Goffman's dramaturgy, the African American "cool pose" culture, and Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis with a summary of findings, implications, and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

Interviews occupy important status in the NBA. It is the most direct way for the fans to get to know the information inside the game, about the players' personalities and opinions about the game, and the team.

2.1. Studies Abroad

Since the 1950s and 1960s, when live television broadcasts first brought NBA players into the media spotlight, the post-game interview has evolved into a critical site for image construction. Western scholarship has approached this phenomenon primarily from sociological and communication perspectives. McManus and Robinson [1] found that successful players use affiliative language tied to personal experience and social values to enhance their public standing. Aldridge et al. [2] identified contrasting language styles—optimistic versus self-centered—and argued these choices shape media and audience reception. Delaney et al. [3] further demonstrated that humor and irony enhanced players' perceived eloquence and popularity.

These studies, however, remain largely descriptive, cataloguing what strategies players use without systematically analyzing how and why they function interactionally. To address this gap, the present study draws on two pragmatic frameworks. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory [4], with its concepts of positive and negative face, illuminates how players mitigate face threats through strategies such as avoidance, humor, or polite formulas. Scollon et al. [5] provide an intercultural lens, emphasizing that language reflects cultural identity and social values—an insight particularly relevant to the culturally diverse NBA context. Together, these frameworks enable the case-study analysis to move beyond description and explore both the interactional functions and cultural logic of players' discourse strategies.

2.2. Studies at Home

Chinese scholarship has addressed NBA player image from complementary but non-linguistic angles. Li [6] examined the institutional mechanisms of star image construction through imagology and communication theory, revealing how images are strategically packaged and disseminated. Wang, Bi, and Li [7] applied narratology to NBA television broadcasting, demonstrating how camera work and commentary construct heroic player narratives for commercial and ideological purposes. He [8]

provided a sociological analysis of the African American “cool pose” tracing its manifestations to racial culture, social identity, and masculinity.

These studies illuminate the institutional, narratological, and sociological dimensions of NBA player image construction. However, none specifically addresses the linguistic and pragmatic strategies players employ in real-time media interviews—the gap this thesis seeks to fill.

3. Data and Methodology

This chapter outlines the data sources, case selection criteria, and analytical procedures employed in this study. Given the qualitative and interpretive nature of the research, the emphasis is on purposive case selection and theoretically informed discourse analysis rather than statistical generalization.

3.1. Data Sources

The data for this study consist of NBA players’ media interview video clips and transcripts. Primary sources include interviews conducted by TNT, ESPN, NBA TV, and Tencent, accessed through the Chinese video platform Bilibili, where such content is systematically archived and often accompanied by Chinese subtitles. Cases were selected based on three criteria: (1) the interview contains a clearly identifiable discourse strategy; (2) the player involved is a recognized NBA figure, ensuring representativeness; and (3) the interaction is sufficiently rich to support qualitative analysis. Interviews spanning from 2009 to 2024 were included to capture both iconic historical moments and recent developments.

3.2. Method

This study adopts a qualitative case-study approach. Rather than pursuing statistical generalization, it seeks to provide in-depth, theoretically informed interpretations of representative instances. From a large corpus of available interviews, typical cases were purposively selected to illustrate each of the five discourse strategies identified. This approach aligns with the exploratory nature of the research, allowing close examination of how discourse strategies operate in specific interactional contexts.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative process of thematic coding. Selected interview transcripts and video clips were closely examined to identify recurring discourse patterns, with particular attention to lexical choices, turn-taking behavior, facial expressions, and tone. Drawing on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory and Scollon et al.’s (2012) intercultural discourse framework, these patterns were then grouped into five overarching strategies: polite formulas, humor and satire, coldness (the “cool pose”), silence and avoidance, and teammate defense. Representative excerpts were translated and analyzed in detail, forming the basis of the discussion in Chapter 4.

4. Discourse Strategies Employed by NBA Players

This chapter presents the five core discourse strategies identified in the data. Each strategy is defined, illustrated with representative cases, and analyzed through the theoretical lenses of politeness theory and intercultural discourse analysis.

4.1. Polite Formula in the Interviews

Polite formulas are among the most frequently observed strategies in NBA interviews. Drawing on Brown and Levinson's framework, these formulas serve dual face-saving functions. On the one hand, they attend to the positive face of opponents and teammates by expressing respect and appreciation; on the other, they protect the player's own negative face by avoiding controversy.

A typical example is Nikola Jokic's response after winning the 2023 NBA championship. When asked about the difference down the stretch against the Miami Heat, Jokic replied: "They are a great team; they are a great great team; an intelligent team; amazing team that I respect a lot, and it is an amazing effort by their team." On the surface, this is a conventional display of sportsmanship: Jokic praises the opponent, fulfilling a social expectation. At a deeper level, however, this politeness strategy also enhances Jokic's own positive face. By elevating the opponent, he implicitly magnifies his own team's achievement: defeating a "great great team" is a greater accomplishment. The polite formula thus operates as both a deference mechanism and a subtle form of self-enhancement.

Common polite formulas in NBA interviews include: "They are an excellent team," which acknowledges the opponent's quality; "We need to do our best," which emphasizes collective effort after defeat; and "The coach gave us good tactical arrangements," which deflects personal credit toward the coaching staff. These formulas enable players to navigate sensitive questions while maintaining a controversy-free public image.

4.2. Humor and Satire

Humor and satire constitute a second key strategy; one deeply embedded in the entertainment-oriented culture of American sports media. Unlike polite formulas, which minimize face threats through deference, humor operates by reframing the interview situation itself—transforming a potentially tense or intrusive exchange into a performance of wit and self-awareness.

Jeremy Lin's interview about racial discrimination offers a powerful illustration. Reflecting on being taunted with slurs such as "chink" and "chicken lo mein" during his college career, Lin recalled the advice of his black assistant coach, Kenny Blackburn, and concluded: "If I were a nerd, I wouldn't be able to go to Harvard and play in the NBA." This self-deprecating humor accomplishes several things simultaneously: it acknowledges the pain of racism without allowing it to dominate the narrative, it reclaims agency by redefining the terms of the insult, and it presents Lin as resilient and intellectually confident. As Scollon et al. (2012) note, humor can serve as a form of intercultural resistance, allowing speakers to challenge dominant narratives while maintaining conversational rapport.

Similarly, Utah Jazz player Joe Ingles once joked about his own lack of athleticism after an opponent fell while defending him: "I'm not that good. Maybe he just tipped over himself." Such self-mockery functions as impression management, signaling confidence and humility simultaneously. In the NBA's performance-driven media environment, humor allows players to appear genuine, approachable, and in control of the narrative.

4.3. Coldness: The "Cool Pose"

The “cool pose,” as theorized by sociologist Richard Majors and elaborated in the Chinese context by He Jing (2017), is a stylized form of self-presentation historically rooted in African American culture. It involves the deliberate performance of emotional detachment, strength, and control—a response to a social environment in which black males have long faced structural pressure and racial threat. In the context of NBA interviews, the “cool pose” manifests as a refusal to engage with the emotional or narrative expectations of the media.

The most iconic example is Kobe Bryant’s response during the 2009 NBA Finals. After Game 2, with the Lakers leading 2-0, a reporter asked: “What’s the story? Are you not happy or you’re only half happy?” Bryant’s reply was immediate and severe: “What should be happy about? Job’s not finished.” His expression remained completely unsmiling. This was not merely a rejection of complacency; it was a rejection of the interviewer’s framing. The reporter invited Bryant into a celebratory narrative; Bryant refused, asserting a different set of values—focus, discipline, and relentless pursuit of the goal. As Majors (1986) argues, the “cool pose” subverts dominant (often white-defined) expectations and asserts an alternative form of masculine authority.

This strategy is closely related to but distinct from silence. While silence simply withholds speech, the “cool pose” performs controlled, minimal speech in a way that commands the interaction. It is a discourse strategy that gains its power precisely from what it refuses to offer.

4.4. Silence and Avoidance

Silence and avoidance represent a strategy of strategic non-engagement. In politeness theory terms, this strategy addresses threats to both positive and negative face: it protects the player’s negative face by refusing to answer intrusive questions, and it protects the positive face of teammates or the organization by avoiding topics that might generate controversy.

Russell Westbrook’s interview during the 2017 playoffs exemplifies this strategy. When asked about the team’s struggles when he rested, Westbrook replied: “I don’t want nobody to split us. Next question.” This response is significant in several respects. First, the grammatical form (“I don’t want nobody”) carries a vernacular quality that asserts Westbrook’s authentic, unpolished identity. Second, the content directly refuses the premise of the question: the reporter’s framing implies internal team problems, and Westbrook’s answer reframes the issue as one of external attempts to “split” the team. Third, the abrupt transition “Next question” constitutes a bald, on-record act of conversational control, signaling that Westbrook, not the journalist, determines the acceptable boundaries of discourse. This is, in effect, a power move—one that protects team cohesion and asserts the player’s autonomy.

4.5. Teammate Defense

Teammate defense is a strategy in which a player, typically a team leader, intervenes to protect a teammate from hostile media questioning. This strategy constructs and reinforces a leadership identity while simultaneously strengthening group solidarity.

A paradigmatic case is LeBron James’s intervention during a 2015 playoff press conference. When teammate Matthew Dellavedova was asked a pointed, personalized question about a controversial play, James physically intervened, pulling the

microphone toward himself: “I was shoved by hands at game 2, and the fact that I'm still here to play the game we don't talk about it. I'm a little off about it because this is my teammate who goes on work to tail off every single night and people are trying to give him a bad rap and he doesn't deserve it, and I don't like it.”

This intervention operates on multiple levels. At the interpersonal level, James exercises his status as the team's star to shield a less powerful teammate. At the discursive level, he shifts the topic from Dellavedova's alleged transgression to his own experience of rough play, thereby universalizing the issue and diffusing the personal attack. At the identity level, James constructs an image of himself as protector and leader—a “big brother” figure. This strategy simultaneously manages the immediate interactional threat and reinforces the long-term relational bonds central to team cohesion.

5. Cultural Implications of NBA Players' Discourse Strategies

The discourse strategies identified in Chapter 4 are shaped by deeper cultural forces. This chapter analyzes these forces through three progressive layers: the institutional performance culture of the NBA, the subcultural identity of African American players, and the macro-level contrast between Eastern and Western value systems.

5.1. The Performance Culture of the NBA: Front Stage and Backstage

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a powerful framework for understanding NBA interview discourse. In Goffman's terms, the media interview is a “front stage” performance, where players present a version of themselves that conforms to public expectations. The “backstage”—the locker room, practice facility, and private life—remains largely hidden from view.

This distinction is critical to understanding why players employ strategies like humor, politeness, and the “cool pose.” On the front stage of the interview, players must balance two competing demands: the seriousness of athletic competition and the entertainment expectations of the media audience. Politeness and humor serve to maintain a likeable, professional image; the “cool pose” projects strength and focus.

Draymond Green of the Golden State Warriors illustrates the frontstage/backstage dynamic vividly. In interviews and on his personal blog, Green frequently uses humor and self-mockery to manage his controversial public image. After previously calling Rudy Gobert “a coward,” Green later praised Gobert's defense with characteristic exaggeration: “Rudy actually not trash anymore... When he switched on to the guy, it's like his antennas pop on.” He has also joked about his reputation for excessive physical play, calling it “a badge of honor” and linking it to championship success. This humorous, self-aware front stage performance makes Green appear genuine and approachable.

Yet behind the scenes, Green has been involved in physical altercations with teammates, most notably punching Jordan Poole during a 2022 practice. The contrast is revealing: the front stage humor manages public perception, while backstage behavior reveals the competitive tensions that the front stage performance strategically conceals. NBA interviews are thus sites of careful impression management, driven by the commercial and reputational imperatives of a global sports-entertainment industry.

5.2. The “Cool Pose” as Subcultural Identity and Resistance

While the performance culture of the NBA explains the general need for strategic self-presentation, the specific form of the “cool pose” requires a deeper cultural explanation. Drawing on He Jing (2017) and Richard Majors, the “cool pose” can be understood as a discourse strategy rooted in the historical experience of African Americans.

From slavery through Jim Crow to ongoing structural inequality, African Americans have long faced an environment in which open emotional expression could be dangerous and in which the dominant white culture has sought to define and control black identity. The “cool pose” emerged as a strategic response: a performance of emotional control, toughness, and self-possession that resists external definition and asserts dignity on one’s own terms.

Kobe Bryant’s “Job’s not finished” and Russell Westbrook’s “Next question” are not simply instances of coldness or avoidance; they are performances of this cultural identity. They refuse to participate in the narratives that journalists seek to impose—whether the narrative of satisfied victory or the narrative of internal team discord. In doing so, they enact a form of discursive resistance that has deep historical roots.

This perspective also helps avoid the risk of essentialism. The “cool pose” is not a biological or racial trait; it is a historically developed cultural strategy available to and performed by particular individuals in particular contexts. White players from different cultural backgrounds employ different strategies. Nikola Jokic, for instance, consistently uses humility and deference in interviews, reflecting a cultural tradition shaped by Orthodox Christianity and collectivist values. After winning the 2021 MVP award, Jokic stated: “Without them [teammates], I’m nothing. Without them, I cannot do nothing.” These contrasting discourse strategies—one emphasizing self-contained strength, the other emphasizing communal humility—reflect different cultural resources rather than essential racial characteristics.

5.3. Individualism and Collectivism: A Cross-Cultural Comparison

At the broadest level, discourse strategies in NBA interviews reflect fundamental cultural value orientations. Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism dimension [9] provides a useful, if necessarily simplified, framework for understanding this contrast.

Chinese former NBA player Yao Ming’s jersey retirement speech in 2017 exemplifies a collectivist discourse orientation. Yao’s speech was structured around thanking the organization, the city, the community, and each of his coaches: “Thank you for building this team and this community... Their effort and their trust in me, make me believe that coming to Houston is my destination.” Individual achievement is consistently framed as the product of collective support.

In contrast, LeBron James’s interview after winning the 2016 championship—completing a historic 3-1 comeback—foregrounds individual agency and legacy: “That made me greatest player of all time. I cried, like I was ecstatic... that one right there made you greatest player of all time.” Even when discussing leadership, James emphasizes personal responsibility and individual will. This is not egotism per se, but a cultural orientation that values individual achievement as the primary measure of success.

These differences are rooted in distinct cultural histories. Chinese collectivism draws on Confucian traditions emphasizing social harmony and the subordination of individual interests to group welfare, reinforced by an agricultural civilization

requiring collective cooperation. American individualism, by contrast, emerged from Enlightenment thought, Reformation theology emphasizing the individual's direct relationship with God, and the frontier experience of the Westward Movement. In the contemporary NBA, this individualistic orientation is further reinforced by the commercial logic of a league that depends on star power to drive fan engagement and revenue.

What is crucial, however, is that these cultural orientations are performed on the same NBA “front stage.” Individualistic and collectivist strategies are not mutually exclusive categories, but resources that players draw upon to construct particular public identities within a shared institutional context.

6. Conclusions

This study has identified and analyzed five key discourse strategies employed by NBA players in media interviews: polite formulas, humor and satire, coldness (the “cool pose”), silence and avoidance, and teammate defense. Through the lens of politeness theory and intercultural discourse analysis, these strategies are revealed to be far more than linguistic reflexes: they are carefully calibrated performances that manage face, negotiate power, and construct public identity.

The cultural analysis further demonstrates that these strategies are shaped by three intersecting forces. At the institutional level, Goffman’s dramaturgy reveals the NBA interview as a “front stage” performance driven by the commercial and entertainment imperatives of American sports media. At the subcultural level, the “cool pose” reflects the historical experience and cultural resistance of African American athletes. At the macro-cultural level, Hofstede’s individualism-collectivism dimension illuminates contrasting patterns of self-presentation between Eastern and Western players.

This study is not without limitations. The qualitative case-study approach, while enabling deep interpretive analysis, necessarily limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research could complement this approach with quantitative methods, such as corpus-based analysis of a larger sample of interviews or extend the investigation to other sports leagues and cultural contexts. Additionally, the growing role of social media as a site of athlete self-presentation and direct fan interaction warrants further scholarly attention.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how professional athletes navigate the complex communicative demands of the media environment. It offers practical implications for cross-cultural communication training, sports media literacy, and the development of image management strategies for public figures. More broadly, it demonstrates the value of discourse analysis as a tool for illuminating the intersection of language, culture, and identity in high-stakes public communication.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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