

# *A Study of Evidentiality and Its Pragmatic Functions in Shou Chew's Response*

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**Abstract:** On March 23rd, the House Energy and Commerce Committee conducted a hearing with the CEO of TikTok, Shou Chew, focused on TikTok's consumer privacy and data security practices, its impact on children, and its relationship with the Chinese Communist Party. The hearing was titled "TikTok: How Congress Can Safeguard American Data Privacy and Protect Children from Online Harms.". After the hearing, which lasted more than five hours, people were abuzz about Mr. Chou's performance. This paper applies to the method of conversational analysis to analyze the distribution and linguistic features of the evidentiality in Shou Chew's response, so as to discover the pragmatic function and communicative effect behind it. Through the analysis of our data, the research questions are as follows: (1) What is the distribution of the five evidentials in the Mr. Chou's response? (2) How can they be reflected in the response? (3) What pragmatic functions and communicative effects does its use reflect? It is found that the distribution is uneven, among which thinferential and imaginative comparingly have higher proportion. The linguistic forms of evidential are not restricted to specific words, but also involve the use of phrases. They serve three functions: persuading others, enhancing reliability, and creating friendly relationships.

## **1. Introduction**

"Charm offensive", the word that the Voice of America has used to evaluate Shou Chew's performance in the congressional hearing held in March 23, 2023. "It is a no win of hearing", predicted by the Bloomberg News before this hearing. We cannot tell what is the consequence of TikTok in U.S. in the basis of his contribution, whether or not it will be finally banned by the congress. What we can observe is that the way how Mr. Chou responds does impress the audience and gain much support for TikTok than before. According to the New York Times, it is rare for a CEO of foreign company to participant the congressional hearing. The last time happened 13 years ago when the CEO of Toyota, Akio Toyoda, was questioned by senator about the national recall of vehicles and finally was reported as "as far as he was willing to go in addressing the senator's concerns". So, it needs to figure out how he responds to the crisis with such impressive display. Based on the concept of evidentiality and conversational analysis, this paper will focus on how Mr. Chou use evidentials to reach his goals in his utterance.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of evidentiality was put forward in the 1911 by the American anthropologist Franz Boas. Since Boas put forward the concept of evidentiality, its studies have moved into great development stage. It is Hu Zhuanglin[1] who introduced it to China. Yang Linxiu[2] gives an overview about the research status of evidentiality at home and abroad, discovering that booming studies on evidentiality at aboard within the last 30 years and the clearly upward trend at home especially after 2004. This section will review the current status of evidentiality from the different perspectives, such as cognitive linguistics, pragmatics. Its studies have its origins from the typological perspective. Willett[3] analyzes 38 natural languages on the basis of formal features of evidentiality, and finds that, with the exception of two of them, the sources of information in the languages can be classified into two types: “direct evidential” and “indirect evidential”. Chen Zheng[4] compares the difference of use of it in English and Chinese from three aspects, word type, the reliability of source of information and the trend of use of it.

The study of evidentiality from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) remains a hot research topic at home and abroad. The study of evidentiality from this perspective includes both the traditional Systemic Functional Linguistics led by Halliday and the Appraisal Theory developed by Martin. Halliday and Matthiessen[5] first mention the concept of evidentiality in their book and makes a brief introduction. Fang Hongmei[6] explores the realization of three interpersonal functions of evidentiality: coordinating interpersonal relationships, getting closer, and evading responsibility. Based on engagement theory, Zhang Yunling[7] analyzes the interpersonal functions of evidentiality in business English communication. The study shows that the interpersonal functions of evidentiality are mainly reflected in four aspects: creating a friendly atmosphere, evaluating the reliability of information, influencing the listener’s point of view, and shortening or widening the distance between the speaker and the listener.

## 3. Data Collection

The data is drawn from a congressional hearing March 23, 2023 to discuss the adverse impact of TikTok towards America. Video recording of the hearing is publicly available through the website of C-SPAN, a U.S. cable television network mainly broadcasting the proceedings of the U.S. federal government[8]. Obviously, the interaction in congressional hearing is different from ordinary interaction. One thing to be noticed is that participants in the hearing may or may not have the same goal. This study takes Mushin’s[9] definition and classification of evidentiality as theoretical framework, and the epistemic stance will be mentioned as complementary. They are personal experience, the inferential, the reportive, the factual and the imaginative evidential. Under such a circumstance, this paper is aimed to give a full analysis of Shou Chew’s discourse during the interaction in which he is targeted to prove its trustworthiness.

## 4. The Analysis of Evidentiality in Shou Chew’s Response

### 4.1 The Distribution of Evidentiality in Shou Chew’s Response

Considering the situation of interruption, we only look at the evidential used in complete and meaningful sentences so that the source of information and the attitude behind the utterance can be conceived. Through the analysis of the video, the results show behind that there are totally 103 evidentials in Shou Chew’s response, which includes 12 factual evidentials, 12 reportive evidentials, 49 inferential evidentials, 11 personal experience evidentials and 19 imaginative evidentials. We can observe that, in Figure 1, the inferential is the most frequently used among the five, accounting for

nearly half of total. The imaginative accounts for one in five while the last three share similar proportion.

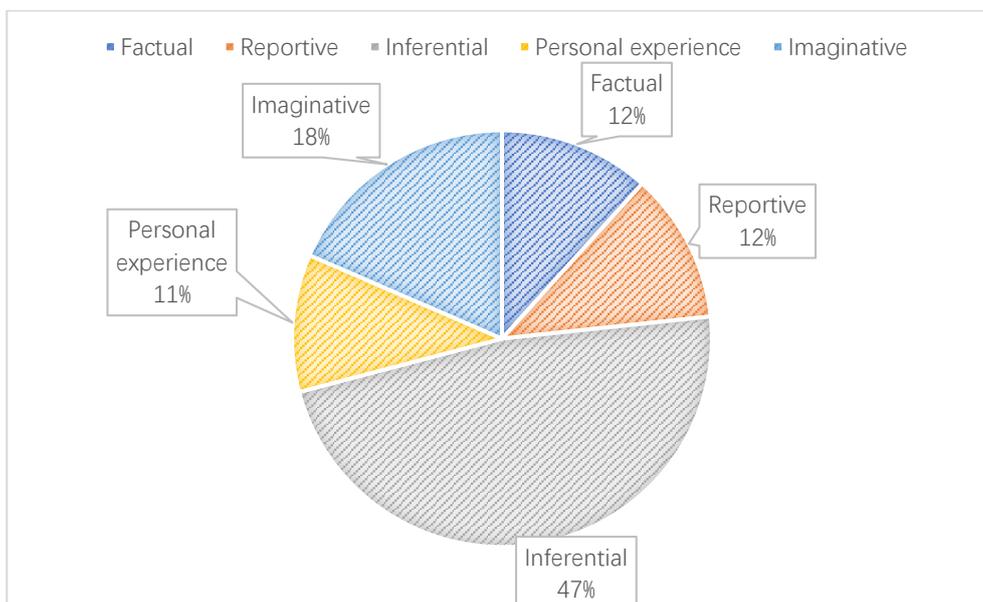


Figure 1: The Distribution of Evidentials in Shou Chew's Response.

## 4.2 The Examples of Evidentiality in Shou Chew's Response

### 4.2.1 Personal Experience

According to Figure 1, we have found the personal experience occupies a small part, in which two kinds of forms are usually used: I/We + sensory verb (hear, see) and it is + adjective + sensory verb, as the following shows:

(1) Still, we have heard important concerns about the potential for unwanted foreign access to U.S. data and potential manipulation of The TikTok U.S. ecosystem.

(2) I have seen no evidence that the Chinese government has access to that data they have never asked us we have not provided well.

These basically cover all forms of the perceptual experience, referring to private states, like emotions and sensations (Mushin, 2001). In this aspect, the speaker has the same thoughts with the participants in original information source. The sources of information of the above example all comes from Shou Chew's own perception. Example (1) and (2) come to show that Mr. Chou has the acoustical and visual experience of the events. What "we heard" points to the source of information that "important concerns about the potential for unwanted foreign access to U.S. data and potential manipulation of The TikTok U.S. ecosystem" is from his auditory experience and here he sets the stage with their words and then presents the company's response and strong commitment to it. Example (2) is based on his visual experience to state his powerful counterpoint in order to eliminate their negative speculation of TikTok.

### 4.2.2 Inferential

The use of the inferential is shown in the representation of information as inferred based on evidence. Notably, he uses the word "probably" only once when asked about where Mr. Beckerman, his vice president, is. Since it is the most constantly used category, we can pay much attention on other realizations as concluded: I/We believe/think, as far as I am understand/aware/know. The phrase

“I can tell you” and degree adverb “probably” occurs the least. Here are two examples:

(1) Now *we believe* we are the only, the only company that offers this level of transparency.

(2) Again congresswoman, this is something that *as far as I understand* no other company including American companies are willing to go.

Example (1) is from Mr. Chou’s self-narration in which he confirms the transparency of TikTok in the basis of his own evidence to save TikTok from a critical situation. Example (2) is a unique phrase to present the source of information differentiated from the ordinary. The meaning of “as far as I understand” remains the same with “I believe”, implying the source of information coming from the speaker’s inference. Through comparison, Mr. Chou dedicates to build and safe and transparent impression to these American officials.

### 4.2.3 Reportive

As we have concluded it shares the similar percentage with the personal experience and that the most frequently used term for the reportive is sb + mention/point out/talk about. In our data, he normally quotes what the senators has just said to support or further confront their idea. Here is an example:

(1) I’m glad you asked this question because like you *pointed out* we actually do not believe we collect more data than any other social media company out there. a lot of these reports and I, we can talk about which specific one you’re *talking about*. A lot of them are not that accurate.

In example (1), we can find the reportive, “you point out”, “you’re talking about” in his utterance. These two phrases “point out” and “talking about” illustrates the source of information, referring to the risk of leaking user’s personal information in TikTok mentioned by the senator. Further, he doubts the accuracy of information in her question to protect the legitimation of TikTok.

### 4.2.4 Factual

It also has the similar proportion with the personal experience, the factual and the reportive. The most salient feature points to the use of statistics. The numbers are mainly about the description of his company. Here are three similar examples:

(1) Today we have more than a billion monthly active users around the world, including over 150 million in the United States.

(2) We’re close to 5 million American businesses.

(3) It’s a private company. Sixty percent of the company is owned by global institutional investors. 20 is owned by the founder and 20 owned by employees around the world. By then says five board members three of them are American.

The first two come from Mr. Chou’s self-narration in the beginning of the hearing and the last is inquired about its questionable relationship between TikTok and Chinese officials. Therefore, he offers the large number of American users and businesses in his platform to enhance all the senators and audience about the benefit and value of his platform. In this way can he struggle to persuade skeptical members. Example (3) also relates to enquiries about the political orientation of TikTok, hence he officially and clearly demonstrates the composition of the company’s personnel to present its global nature, which serves as the unchallenged fact.

### 4.2.5 Imaginative

As the data has shown, Mr. Chou often use the imaginative late in the hearing to help him in interpreting the mechanisms of TikTok promotion. So, its use can be well suited to a hypothetical event. In his response, the form “if...will...” almost covers every situation. Since it is hardly challenged, its use firmly assists his words to explicate all possibilities.

(1) *If* a user searches you know words that expresses mental health issues. we actually redirect them to a safety page. *If* you search “I want to die”, it *will* redirect you to a safety page for example.

(2) It’s public so *if* you post a video that’s you choose that video to go public. That’s how you get people to see your video.

These two are both the phrases of the imaginative, “If...will...” or “if”. The information imagined is after the word “if”: searching “I want to die” and posting a video. When questioned about the possibility of promoting distressing and potentially harmful content for certain kind people, like the pregnant or the addict, he proposes a hypothesis to display their healthy mechanism and community to prove its safety. This kind of evidential can be served as convincing evidence to support the speaker’s idea. Example (2) happens in a similar situation when responding to whether the TikTok collects personal information.

To conclude, the imaginative relies on the speaker’s perception and aims to guide the listener to agree with the speaker’s position by means of the unverifiability of unknown information. It is when Mr. Chou tries to make the information clear and acceptable, and introduce their operation mechanism that the imaginative evidential is adapted.

### 4.3 Pragmatic Function of Evidential in Shou Chew’s Response

As a kind of institutional discourse, participants in general, hold their goals in interaction through language. Accordingly, the major pragmatic functions behind the evidential are persuading others, strengthen reliability, negotiate friendly relationship.

The first function is determined by the nature of this hearing since it has drawn the darker side of TikTok. Since it is clear that both American senators and Shou Chew want to prove each other unreasonable, their discourse involves persuasive nature. Especially in Mr. Chou’s response, the reportive and personal experience are used to give other participants his own knowledge and certainty, which is targeted to reassure their concerns in issues like data privacy and potential manipulation.

The second function is mostly served by the facts and hypotheses. As the CEO of TikTok, Mr. Chou represents the whole company. In particular, he needs to strengthen the reliability of his words while facing crisis of confidence. Several evidential markers like accurate statistics are capable to serve this function. This can be normally seen in the Mr. Chou’s repeated narration about the nature and the composition of the company’s senior personnel.

The third is achieved by the use of inferential and reportive. Evidentiality, in the interaction, can play the interpersonal function of negotiating friendly relationship. This can be deduced by the rare use of “must”, “undoubtedly” etc. In contrast, the plentiful use of “I think/I believe”, “you mentioned”, such forms can introduce the speaker’s own views into the discourse, which come from the personal cultural background or cognition of the world, so they are negotiable and allow the existence of other different voices. In the interaction, it can promote the further discussion between the communicative parties, which reflects the pragmatic function of negotiation friendly relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

Taking the interaction in a congressional hearing held for discussing issues about TikTok as the data, the purpose of this paper is to discover the characteristics of Shou Chew’s use of evidential and its pragmatic function. After discussion, three main functions are involved, persuading others, strengthen reliability, negotiate friendly relationship. America has been always critical of relevant topics around TikTok, and at the end of hearing they fail to reach any consensus. Although we do not know exactly how much effect Shou Chew’s performance will make to the future of TikTok, the skills in his utterance have remained influence.

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