

Expectations of Social Indexicality: Mandarin Chinese T/V distinction

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Forms of address both shape interactional contexts and are constrained by interlocutors' representations of those contexts. Among these forms, second-person pronouns constitute a particular set of indexical expressions with rich social meanings, especially in languages exhibiting a T/V distinction. The T/V distinction is attested crosslinguistically as a contrast between “informal” T forms (from Latin *tu*) and “formal” V forms (from Latin *vos*).

Foundational work on T/V distinction has argued that indexical meanings of T/V forms are organized along multiple social dimensions, most prominently Brown and Gilman's (1960) framework of power-solidarity. In addition to this dyad, later sociolinguistic critiques suggested that the T/V distinction is also related to another dimension: contextual setting (e.g., Clyne et al., 2009). Therefore, *formality* should be introduced as a third dimension alongside *power* and *solidarity* to model the indexical meanings of T/V forms. Another line of indexicality research suggested that indexical meanings also differ in degrees of conventionality (Potts, 2007; Silverstein, 2003). Given this, Sinnott (2013) proposed a layered indexical field for Spanish T/V forms, in which more stable meanings are positioned in inner layers and give rise to more context-dependent interpretations in outer layers. However, the organization of these meanings within the indexical field remains unclear. In particular, the innermost layer groups together heterogeneous attributes such as demographic categories, interpersonal relations, and contextual indicators, despite the possibility that interlocutors perceive these meanings along distinct social dimensions: for instance, attributes like “age” and “relation” might be more likely associated with the dimensions of power and solidarity, respectively. Moreover, because T/V meanings are interactionally co-constructed, focusing on isolated forms rather than exchanges may overlook how address choices dynamically shape perception and production in discourse (Eckert, 2019).

The present study addresses these issues through two experiments on the Mandarin Chinese T/V system (*nǐ* vs. *nín*). Following Sinnott's layered conventionality and McCready's (2014) account of expressive meaning, Experiment 1 identifies conventionalized indexical meanings as frequently evoked interpretations of social relations. We used an elicitation task in which participants read conversations with different T/V exchanges and generated as many interpretations as possible. Results identified *occupational asymmetry*, *acquaintance*, and *institution setting* as the most commonly reported social meanings associated with the linguistic variation. These elicited meanings were then used as rating dimensions in Experiment 2.

Experiment 2 tests how different T/V exchanges in simulated two-speaker dialogues (one turn per speaker) predict interlocutors' perceptions of these elicited conventionalized indexical meanings. Participants rated the likelihood that the two speakers 1) exhibit significant occupational asymmetry, 2) are acquaintances, and 3) are in an institutional setting, representing the three social dimensions of *power*, *solidarity*, and *formality*. In the pilot session, 48 native Mandarin speakers each encountered 12 randomly selected scenarios of four conditions of T/V exchange (T-T, T-V, V-T, and V-V).

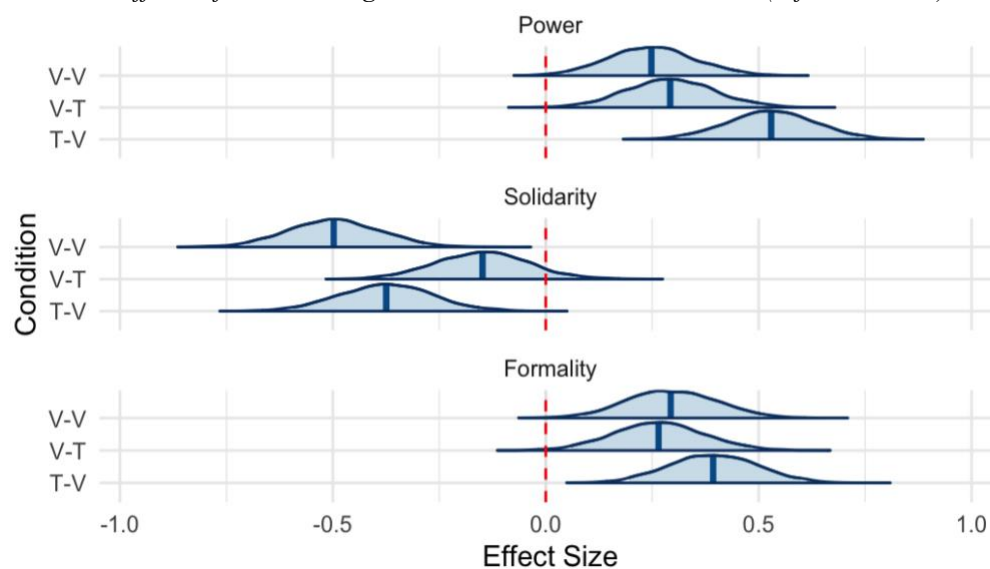
Multivariate Bayesian regression (with weakly informative priors) revealed a systematic effect of the introduction of V form in exchange: compared to T-T baseline, the V form generally increased perceived power asymmetry and contextual formality, while decreasing perceived solidarity. Specifically, T-V exchange led to the strongest increase in perceived power asymmetry ($\beta = 0.53$, 95% CrI [0.33, 0.73]) and contextual formality ($\beta = 0.40$, 95% CrI [0.19, 0.61]). By contrast, V-V exchange produced the strongest decrease in perceived solidarity ($\beta = -0.50$, 95% CrI [-0.72, -0.28]) (see fig.1). Reciprocal exchanges (T-T and V-V) were associated with lower perceived power asymmetry ($\beta = -0.29$, 95% CrI [-0.44, -0.15])

and lower perceived contextual formality ($\beta = -0.19$, 95% CrI $[-0.34, -0.03]$) relative to non-reciprocal exchanges, while no reliable effect was observed for perceived solidarity ($\beta = 0.02$, 95% CrI $[-0.14, 0.18]$). Within non-reciprocal exchanges only (T-V vs. V-T), T-V exchanges were associated with lower perceived power asymmetry ($\beta = -0.23$, 95% CrI $[-0.43, -0.04]$) and higher perceived solidarity ($\beta = 0.23$, 95% CrI $[0.02, 0.43]$), whereas no reliable effect emerged for contextual formality ($\beta = -0.14$, 95% CrI $[-0.34, 0.19]$). Findings collectively suggest that the indexical field construction does not rely on the selection of a single form, but on the exchange that dynamically shapes interlocutors' expectations about indexical meanings.

A full-scale data collection for Experiment 2 is underway and will be analyzed using the same pre-registered statistical procedures specified in OSF.

Figure 1

Estimated Effects of T/V Exchange on Perceived Social Dimensions (reference: T-T)



Keywords: indexicality, T/V distinction, probability, social meaning, perception

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