Expressivity of Second Person Pronouns: Mandarin Chinese T/V Exchanges

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BACKGROUND

- Second-person pronouns convey indexical meaning, which maps onto the expressive dimension in Kaplanian use-conditional semantics to capture social meaning.
- **T/V distinction** is the pervasive morphological distinction between informal and formal second-person pronouns that is named after Latin *tu* and *vos*.

EXPRESSIVES

- We preserve Potts (2007) multidimensional tuple architecture but expand the expressive "indices" (c_e) from tracking static speaker-states to tracking relative interactive dimensions: $\langle$Power, Solidarity, Formality$\rangle$, combining intuitions from Brown and Gilman (1960)'s dyadic model with later critiques concerning social context (Cinque, 2019).

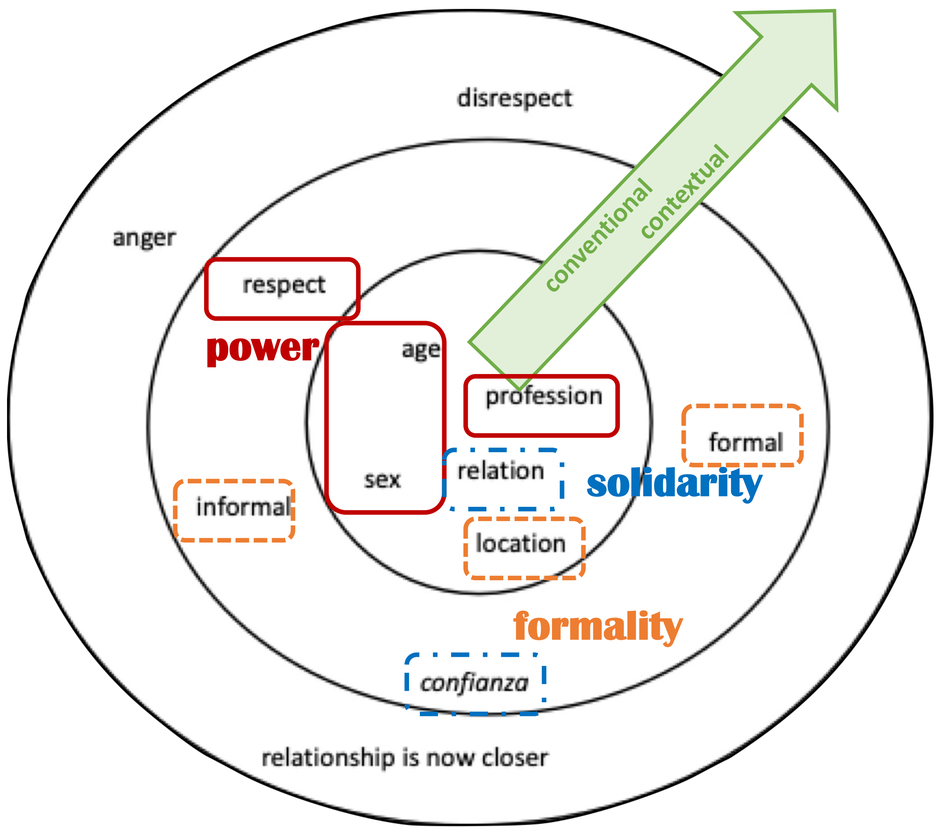


Figure 1: Sinnott (2013), p. 58: The Hierarchical Indexical Field of Address Forms

- Potts (2007) defines T/V forms as non-descriptive, conventional expressives:

$$[\![\text{FORMAL}(a)]\!]^c = c', \text{ where } c \approx^{\dagger}_{c_J,[\![V]\!]} c'$$
$$[\![\text{FAMILIAR}(a)]\!]^c = c', \text{ where } c \approx^{\ell}_{c_J,[\![T]\!]} c'$$

i. † represents the formal object; and
ii. ℓ represents the familiar object.

- **Gradation via Ordinal Scales:** Indexical meanings vary in degrees of conventionality (Silverstein, 2003). While Potts (2007) originally suggested expressives' gradient nature via real-number interval updating, we model this variation on an **ordinal scale** rather than a binary or interval scale. This captures ordered, ranked degrees of social distance/deference without assigning arbitrary numerical values:

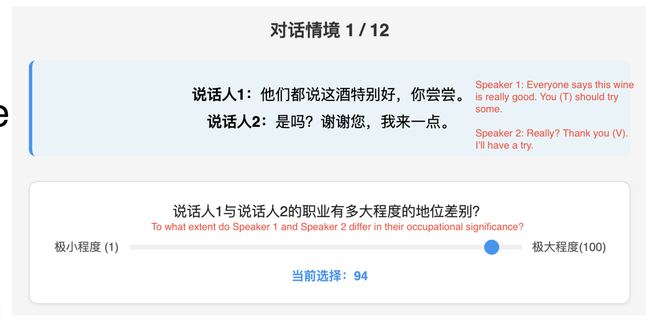
a. *nín* : $\langle e, t\rangle \to \epsilon$
b. $[\![\textit{nín}]\!]^c$ = the function f such that $f([\![a]\!]^c)(c) = c'$, where
   i. $c' \approx^{\omega}_{c_J,[\![a]\!]^c} c'$;
   ii. ω represents an ordered honorific rank Ω; and
   iii. $\omega_T < \omega_N < \omega_V$, capturing the ordinal step-up in expressivity.

- **Projectivity via Predictability:** The degree to which an expressive projects depends on interpretations. T/V exchanges thus predict the possible meanings generated.

METHODOLOGY

Research question: How do Mandarin Chinese T/V forms shape hearers' inferences about social relations and contexts?

Experiment: Rating task
Participants (pilot N = 48) rated how likely it was that the two speakers:
1) exhibit job rank asymmetry,
2) are acquaintances, and
3) are in an institutional setting.



These social attributes are summarized from a prior experiment where participants (N = 30) read conversations with different T/V exchanges and generated these interpretations as the most robust and conventionally decoded ones.

RESULTS

Data Preprocessing:
Pilot data showed a non-normal bimodal distribution (clusters at 25 and 75). Continuous 1–100 ratings were converted to a 5-point scale to match categorical perception.

Exchange	Power (β)	Solidarity (β)	Formality (β)
T-V	0.80 [0.44, 1.18]	-0.56 [-0.93, -0.20]	0.56 [0.17, 0.94]
V-T	0.36 [-0.01, 0.73]	-0.33 [-0.70, 0.04]	0.39 [0.01, 0.78]
V-V	0.31 [-0.06, 0.69]	-0.77 [-0.14, -0.40]	0.54 [0.16, 0.92]

Table 1: Bayesian Ordinal Regression Results (β with 95% Credible Intervals)

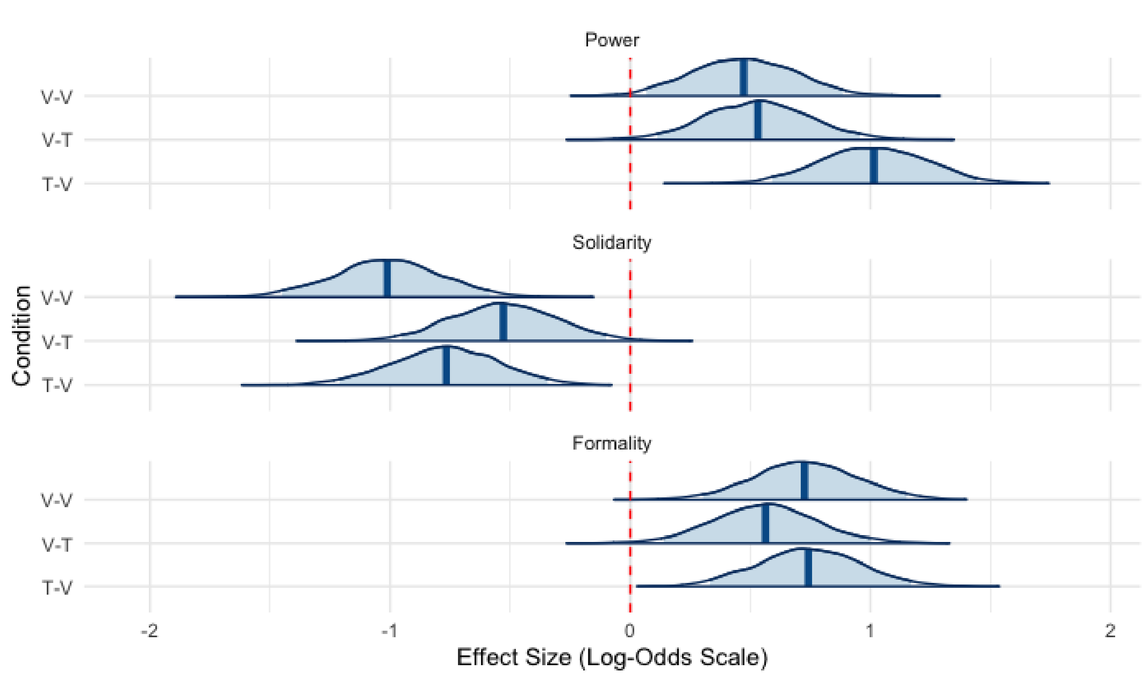


Figure 2: Ordinal model posterior predictions

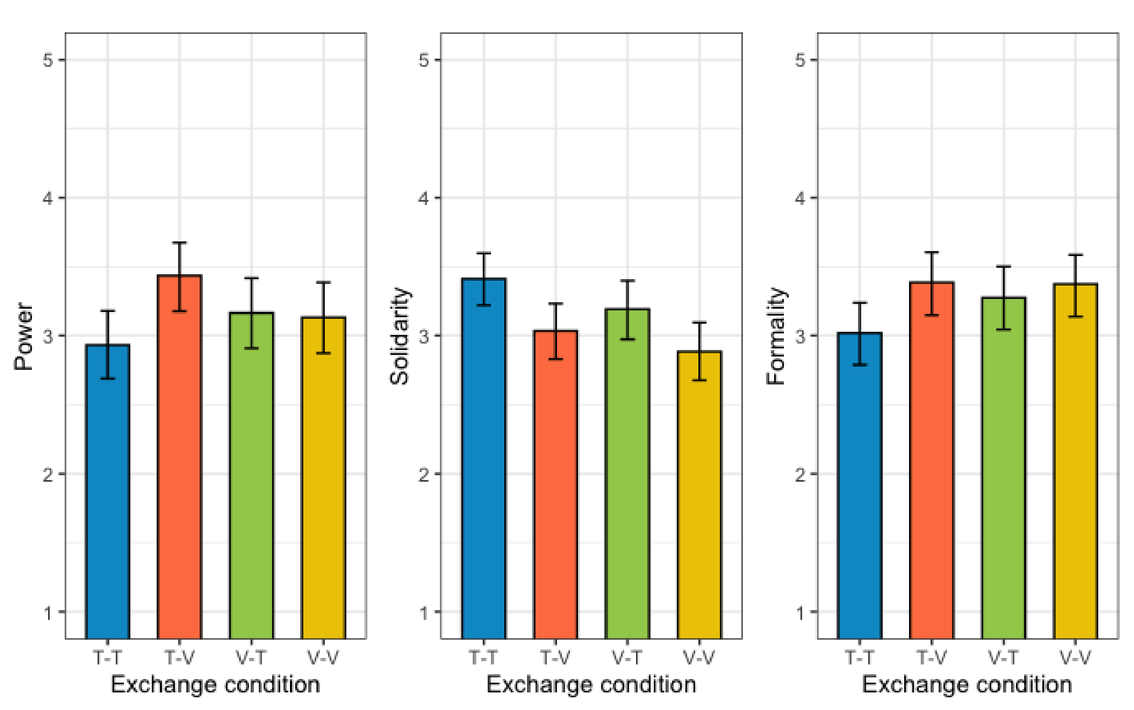


Figure 3: Indexical meanings across T/V exchanges

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