

## Historical Terms of Address

Dániel Z. Kádár  
Professor of English Language and Linguistics  
Director of Centre for Intercultural Politeness Research  
University of Huddersfield  
Queensgate  
Huddersfield  
HD1 3DH  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: d.z.kadar@hud.ac.uk

### 1. Introduction

Terms of address played a fundamental role in pre-modern forms of both “mediated” and “immediate” Chinese interpersonal interaction (Goffman 1967), and they continue to be regarded as important in modern times. Chinese historical forms of address have a number of interrelated characteristics worth noting:

- The pre-modern lexicon of Chinese address terms has a perhaps unprecedented size.
- This extensive size is due to a) the intrinsic relationship between address forms as conventionalized indexicals and Chinese ideologies, in particular (Neo-)Confucianism, and b) to the specific characteristics of the historical Chinese honorifics, which systematically differ from other ‘honorific-rich’ (Pizziconi 2011) East Asian languages such as Japanese and Korean.
- Finally, (early) modern changes in Chinese society, which brought along the disappearance of the historical Chinese honorific system, in particular in immediate communication, manifest themselves in a noteworthy lexical and pragmatic gap between historical and modern Chinese forms of address.

The present entry introduces pre-modern Chinese terms of address by focusing on these characteristics. Note that the labels ‘historical’ and ‘pre-modern’ are used in somewhat vague and interchangeable ways, to cover the period spanning ancient times to 1911.

### 2. Previous research

The examination of historical Chinese forms of address has started by traditional Chinese scholarship and philology 小學. As Yuan’s (1994[2004]) seminal work explains, historical Chinese scholars, who seem to have been intrigued by the extensive size of the addressing lexicon, wrote several treatises as regards the systemisation of forms of address since the Han Dynasty onwards. Many of these treatises appeared in the form of commentaries written to the Classics and other works, such as Ban Gu’s 班固 (32–92) ‘Debate in The White Tiger Hall’ 白虎通義. Along with writing commentaries, Chinese scholars started to treat terms of address as a topic to study for its own sake since relatively early times; the first independent work on this phenomenon, which has been lost unfortunately, ‘Terms of Address’ 稱謂, was written by Lu Bian 盧辯 at the time of the Northern Zhou Dynasty. However,

it was the time of the last Qing Dynasty when independent scholarship on terms of address intensified. The first important work dedicated to this topic can be found in Chapters 23 and 24 of 'Records of Daily Knowledge' 日知錄 by Gu Yanwu 顧炎武 (1613–82), while the first stand-alone study is Zhou Xiangming's 周象明 'Inquiry Into Terms of Address' 稱謂考辯. The real breakthrough in the study of terms of address is represented by Liang Zhangju's 梁章鋸 (1775–1849) 'Record of Terms of Address' 稱謂錄, which can be regarded as the most outstanding historical work in the field.

Modern linguists have studied pre-modern Chinese terms of address from multiple perspectives. In Chinese linguistics, historical terms of address have been examined primarily from semantic and sociolinguistic angles; the perhaps most outstanding studies in this area include Ohta (1972), Chao (1976), Chen (1989[2001]), and Yuan (2004[1994]). In Chinese pragmatics, historical terms of address have gained prominence due to Gu's (1990) seminal study, which theorizes these lexical items through the culture-specificity of their communicational importance. A number of pragmatics studies – including Peng (2000), Kádár (2007), Kádár and Pan (2011), and Pan and Kádár (2012) – have provided models to describe the interactional use of pre-modern terms of address. It is pertinent to note that along with specialized works there are a number of dictionaries of historical terms of address, such as Ji (2000).

### 3. Key feature of historical terms of address

While no quantitative study has been carried out so far to estimate the number of historical Chinese forms of address, it can be argued without the risk of exaggeration that there were several thousand of such terms, even though the number of terms that were in use in a given period is of course lower than this overall figure (see Kádár 2007). In order to explain the need for such a large lexicon, it is important to note that the historical Chinese normative understanding of formal communication is centered on the notion that a) the speaker needs to index any interpersonal relationship by using 'appropriate' forms of address, and that b) they need to denigrate themselves and elevate the other (Gu 1990). There was thus a wide variety of forms to deferentially address people in different social statuses and situated interpersonal roles, and at the same time the use of these address terms entailed that the speaker addressed themselves by applying self-denigrating forms that correlate with the other-elevating forms used in a given context. Chinese forms of address included direct ones – i.e. those that refer to the speech partner and the speaker, as well as indirect ones – i.e. those that refer to a person/property belonging to the speech partner and the speaker.

The large size of the pre-modern addressing lexicon can be traced back to two factors. Firstly, it is due to the historical normative expectation to continuously index interpersonal relationships by using denigrating/elevating forms of address. While it is still debated as to whether there were 'neutral' historical Chinese forms of address with no clear socio-indexical function, or not (see Lee 2012; and Kádár 2007), it is safe to argue that most of the historical address forms indexed highly conventionalized hierarchical interpersonal relationship between the interactants. Exactly because of this, in historical Chinese communication there is a tendency for interactants engaged in 'civil' conversations to avoid 'neutral' personal pronouns with no conventionalized indexical meaning (see Lü 1985). While different interpersonal situations occasioned the use of different forms of address in pre-modern Chinese,

and so the extensive address lexicon seems to be overwhelming for the researcher, it is nevertheless possible to systemize these forms of address. This is because, along with a divide between forms used in familial and non-familial settings (see Lin 1998), historical Chinese forms of address were distributed between three major social groups, following clear (Neo-)Confucian ideological lines: the powerful, the powerless and women (see Kádár 2007). The group of powerful included different subgroups such as the emperor, members of the imperial family, and officials. Members of these subgroups had elaborate self-addressing terminologies – i.e. their high-social status was indexed even when they referred to themselves by using ‘humble’ self-denigrating forms – and were entitled to be addressed by similarly elaborate terms of address. In interactions between members of powerful and powerless social classes, such as an official and a peasant, the powerless party was expected to use honorific forms of address towards the powerful one, and denigrate themselves by using some forms of very humble meaning, while the latter was not to respond by using any address form. Insofar as powerless people interacted in-group, they either used quasi-familial forms of address, or terms of address appropriate to a given institutional context; for example, an innkeeper was expected to address his guest as ‘guest official’ 客官, unless the guest was member of a powerful group (in this latter case they had to be addressed in accordance with their rank). Finally, as women belonged to families and their ranks were determined by that of their father’s or husband’s family, they were to be addressed in accordance with their social ranks gained through birth or marriage. On the other hand, they referred to themselves in relatively uniform gendered (feminine) ways. In summation, it is clear that the normative system of historical Chinese forms of address reflected dominating ideologies, and it is not a coincidence that the education of the ‘proper’ use of address terms was highly doctrinized.

Secondly, the large size of historical Chinese vocabulary is due to the specific characteristics of historical Chinese honorific system. As, unlike in Japanese and Korean, Chinese does not allow morpho-syntactic changes to express this elevating/denigrating meaning, it is essentially conveyed, on the lexical level, in 3 ways: a) elevating/denigrating forms of address, b) elevating/denigrating verbal forms, and c) idiomatic expressions with deferential contextual meaning. Therefore, the Chinese seem to have counterbalanced the lack of morpho-syntax by coining a large number of lexical items. It is pertinent to note that this active coinage practice can not only be captured in the honorific lexicon: considering that rudeness could be expressed by reversing the ‘system’ – i.e. denigrating the other and elevating oneself – it is perhaps not surprising that in historical Chinese communication there is also a surprisingly large rude lexicon (see Kádár 2007).

The ideological changes that transformed early modern Chinese society brought along the disappearance of the historical Chinese addressing lexicon: while some pre-modern lexical items remained in use in some written genres such as ‘official writing’ 公文, they largely disappeared from daily language. This disappearance, which according to Pan and Kádár (2012) took place largely in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, is understandable if one considers the intrinsic relationship between pre-modern forms of address and historical ideologies. Consequently, there is a gap between historical and contemporary Chinese communication; interestingly, even those forms of address that remain in use, or which have been reintroduced in recent times, have relatively ambiguous indexical meaning compared to their historical uses, due to the disappearance of their original conventionalized ideological load. An example par excellence is the form *xiaojie* 小姐 ‘little older sister’, which

was traditionally used towards high-ranking female, and which can either mean ‘miss’ or ‘prostitute’ in contemporary Chinese communication.

### References

- Chao, Yuen Ren 1976. Chinese terms of address. In: Yuen Ren Chao, *Aspects of Chinese Sociolinguistics*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 309–42.
- Chen, Songcen 陳松岑 1989[2001]. *Limao yuyan* 禮貌語言 ‘Polite Language’. Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan.
- Goffman, Erving 1967. On face-work. In: *Interaction Ritual: Essays in Face-to-face Behavior*. New Brunswick: Aldine, pp. 5–45.
- Gu, Yueguo 1990. Politeness phenomena in modern Chinese. *Journal of Pragmatics* 14: 237–57.
- Ji, Changhong 吉常宏 (ed.) 2000. *Hanyu chengwei dacidian* 漢語稱謂大辭典 ‘A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Addressing Terms’. Shijiazhuang, Hebei jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Kádár, Dániel Z. 2007. *Terms of (Im)politeness: On the Communicational Properties of Traditional Chinese (Im)polite Terms of Address*. Budapest: Eötvös Loránd University Press.
- Kádár, Dániel Z., and Yuling Pan 2011. Politeness in China. In: Dániel Z. Kádár, and Sara Mills (eds.) *Politeness in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 125–46.
- Lee, Cher Leng 2012. Self-presentation, face and first-person pronouns in the Analects. *Journal of Politeness Research* 8: 75–92.
- Lin, Meirong 林美容 1998. *Hanyu qinshu chengwei de jiegou fenxi* 漢語親屬稱謂的結構分析 ‘A Structural Analysis of the Chinese Familial Addressing’. Taipei: Daoxiang chubanshe.
- Lü, Shuxiang 呂叔湘 1985. *Jindai hanyu zhidaici* 近代漢語指代詞 ‘The Pronouns of Vernacular Chinese’. Shanghai: Xuelin chubanshe.
- Ohta, Tatsuo 太田辰夫 1972. Chūgoku ni okeru keigo mondai 中国における敬語問題 ‘On the issues of linguistic politeness in China. *Gengo seikatsu* 6: 44–9.
- Pan, Yuling, and Dániel Z. Kádár 2012. *Politeness in Historical and Contemporary Chinese*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Peng, Guoyue 彭國躍 2000. *Kindai Chūgokugo no keigo shisutemu* 近代中国語の敬語システム ‘The Polite Language System of Pre-modern Chinese’. Tokyo: Hakuteisha.
- Pizziconi, Barbara 2011. Honorifics: The cultural specificity of a universal mechanism in Japanese. In: Dániel Z. Kádár, and Sara Mills (eds.) *Politeness in East Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 45–70.
- Yuan, Tingdong 袁庭棟 1994[2004] *Guren chengwei mantan* 古人稱謂漫談 ‘An Introduction into Historical Address Forms’. Beijing, Zhonghua shuju.