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Stance-taking with *Wo Juede* in conversational Chinese

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The present paper deals with one of the most common Mandarin epistemic phrases, *Wo Juede*, and demonstrates that in addition to epistemic self-expression, it has also developed addressee-oriented functions to manage the discourse-pragmatic considerations of everyday talk. Specifically, we find that the mitigative quality of *Wo Juede* has extended from representing speaker's epistemic uncertainty to one that focuses on managing recipient's possible responses. Using quantitative corpus analysis, as well as qualitative conversational analytic methods, this study finds that the use of *Wo Juede* can often be seen as *positioning the speaker's awareness of the addressee's possible objection to a proposition*. Furthermore, it is argued that such a function is uniquely suited for its frequent performance characterized as a *joint-assessment initiator* in sequences of collaborative evaluation.

1. Introduction

Although stance-taking, particularly the expression of epistemicity, has been an extensively studied phenomenon in linguistics, much of the current literature has been limited to English as the investigated language medium. In contrast, this paper shall be based on a Mandarin Chinese (henceforth Chinese) spoken corpus, examining the use of a frequent discourse chunk, namely *Wo Juede* (我觉得), or literally translated as 'I feel' in English. The most literal definition of *Juede* (觉得) is "to feel". Two commonly-used reference sources, the *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian* (现代汉语词典) and *Xiandai Hanyu Babai Ci* (现代汉语八百词), list "to have a certain feeling (产生某种感觉)" as *Juede*'s primary semantic definition. The other recorded definition of *Juede* is "to have a certain opinion (有某种意见)". In *Xiandai Hanyu Cidian*, it is further noted that such an opinion framed by *Juede* is expressed as uncertain (语气较不肯定). Hence, together with the 1st person pronoun *Wo* (我), we can basically translate *Wo Juede* as "I think" or "I feel", indexing the speaker as either expressing a personal feeling or positing a hedged opinion. In other words, *Wo Juede* (henceforth used to represent any constructions with *Wo Juede* as a constituent) may be used to express an affective state or the epistemic certainty of a

speaker. To the best of our knowledge, while there exist sporadic literature on epistemic modality in Chinese, a focal study on *Wo Juede* has not yet been attempted.¹

Through the quantitative analysis of a spoken corpus, it is found that similar to English, the “1st singular pronoun + cognitive verb” construction is a recurrent format used to formulate a variety of epistemic phrases frequently found in Chinese conversation. In particular, *Wo Juede* is found to be one of the most routinized form in conversational Chinese. In simple epistemic terms, *Wo Juede* can be understood as expressing the less-than-certain commitment of the speaker towards a proposition. However, our analysis will show that as a spoken discourse chunk, the deployment of *Wo Juede* also functions to achieve **interactional goals** rather than simply indexing the beliefs of a speaker. Specifically, we find that speakers *regularly and proactively utilize Wo Juede to mitigate in environments where an upcoming disagreement or disaligned response is expected*, sometimes even in opposition to strong personal belief in the proposition posited. We also argue this discourse-pragmatic function is often seen to work in sequences of collaborative assessments, where *Wo Juede* is a *joint-assessment initiator* that calls for a corresponding assessment from its recipient, thus allowing for a back-down in the possible scenario of a disaligned second assessment.

2. The prevalence of *Wo Juede* constructions in conversation

At this juncture, there may be reservations as to why even examine *Wo Juede* as a coherent “lexical bundle” in conversational data. Biber et al. (1999) comprehensive investigation of different registers in English reveals that stance-taking is considerably more common in conversation than in written registers. Additionally, he finds that there is a heavy reliance on the verb complement construction (e.g. I think..., He knows...) to mark stance in conversation (typically with complementizer *that* omitted), especially when controlled by the verbs *think*, *know*, and *suppose* (p984). Scheibman (2002) similarly finds that “I + verbs of cognition” constitute a striking percentage in his conversational data, with *I think* as the most common epistemic phrase, and concludes that “I + verbs of cognition/verbal process” seems to constitute *an autonomous epistemic modal construction in conversational English to routinely do some sort of stance-taking* (p163). Further evidence is found in Thompson and Mulac (1991) in which they argue that *I think* are grammaticized units of subjects and verbs introducing complement clauses. Finally, Kärkäinen’s (2003) microanalysis of the functionality of each instance of *I think* within its contextualized interactive environment² conclusively

¹ With the exception of Tomoko Endo, a fellow colleague at UCLA, who is currently in the process of writing her dissertation on *Wo Juede*.

² In investigating the various functions of *I think*, Kärkäinen categorize them positionally within turns and intonation units (IUs). This differs significantly with my own treatment of Chinese *Wo Juede*. First of all I did not subscribe to IU as the unit of investigation for my study. Secondly, although I also work within the framework of conversation analysis, I do not believe that

establishes that its interactional function within conversation is multi-faceted (p115-174), and does not necessarily function epistemically (meaning to present the speaker's actual belief of a proposition) in conversation. The above evidences point towards the use of various "I + verb predicate" construction, and especially *I think*, as autonomous units of discourse markers deployed by the speaker as vehicles to organize and possibly manage the trajectory of unfolding interactive talk, thus resulting in the prevalence of *I think* in conversational discourse.

How then does the use of *Wo Juede* in Chinese compares with *I think*? To examine the frequency of *Wo Juede* constructions in conversation, we draw on data from the conversational Chinese corpus CallFriend, comprising of approximately 200,000 characters transcribed from 60 unscripted telephone conversations, each lasting between 5 to 30 minutes.³ For each conversation, both the caller and callee are native speakers of Mandarin Chinese from Mainland China. All calls are domestic and were placed inside the continental United States and Canada. As a comparison, a written Chinese corpus, the Lancaster Corpus of Mandarin Chinese (LCMC) was also utilized (McEnery & Xiao, 2004). This corpus has approximately 1 million characters, and was designed as a Chinese match of the Freiburg-LOB Corpus of British English (FLOB) with 15 different registers. Later, in examining the functions of *Wo Juede* using conversation analytic methods, this study further accessed 8 audio-recordings from the CallFriend corpus, accumulating to about 4 hours of conversational data. These were then complemented with approximately 3 hours of personal video recording of multiparty Chinese conversation between native speakers engaged in everyday talk around the dining table during mealtime or playing card games. In all, 7 hours of audio or video recordings were examined for this purpose.

From the spoken and written databases described above, we find that similar to the findings of Scheibman (2002) and Kärkäinen (2003) based on conversational American English, the 1st person pronoun *Wo* also has the preponderance to overwhelmingly occur in conversation.

referencing the position of epistemic phrases (EPs) within turns is productive. A more basic unit in CA, the turn-constructional unit (TCU), should be utilized, as this is the basic unit determining *possible turn completion*. In the emerging trajectory of talk, it is the hearable end of a TCU that informs the next speaker to possibly initiate the next turn, and hence subjecting the prior turn to be possibly complete. In other words, the current speaker does not unilaterally determine the completion of his own turn, but in concert with the next possible speaker. Hence to categorize the position of EPs within a turn (and most probably a multi-TCU turn) to "explore a possibility of a change of speaker at the point where an epistemic marker occurs (Kärkäinen 2003:87)" seems to be misplaced, if the purpose is to investigate the relationship between EPs and interactivity. For the purpose of my study, I have categorized *Wo Juede* in terms of its *relative position to the proposition within its scope*, to be TCU-initial or TCU-final.

³ Canavan, Alexandra & George Zipperlen. CALLFRIEND Mandarin Chinese-Mainland dialect. Linguistic Data Consortium, Philadelphia. 1996.

Table 1: Tokens of *Wo* in Spoken and Written corpus of Chinese

	<i>Raw Frequency</i>	<i>Norm. Frequency (per 10,000)</i>
<i>Spoken Corpus</i> ($\approx 200,000$ char.)	6372	323.4
<i>Written Corpus</i> ($\approx 1,000,000$ char.)	5576	55.7

In Table 1, after normalizing the number of instances between the two corpora of differing size, we find that *Wo* is strikingly 5 times more likely to occur in conversation than in written form. But how are these *Wo* instantiated in conversation? By surveying *Wo* and its verbal collocations, we find that *Wo Juede* is indeed a major player in Chinese conversation.

Table 2: Top 10 Right Collocates of *Wo* in Chinese conversation

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Wo + Right Collocates</i>	<i>Gross Translation</i>	<i>Tokens</i>
1	我就 (就是, 就是说, 就说, 就觉得)	“I + then/only/really”	449
2	我觉得 - <i>Wo Juede</i>	“I think/feel”	243
3	我现在	“I now”	228
4	我说	“I say/said”	219
5	我跟 (跟你说, 跟你讲)	“I + <i>Pre.</i> (I tell you)”	211
6	我想	“I think”	201
7	我也 (也不知道, 也就, 也没, 也不是)	“I also”	180
8	我知道	“I know”	175
9	我是 (是希望, 是想, 是觉得)	“I + <i>Modal</i> ”	123
10	我这 (这边, 这里, 这样, 这个)	“I + here/this”	108
			<i>Total:</i> 2137
			<i>Total # of Agentive Wo:</i> 4986
			<i>Percentage:</i> 42.86%

Using our conversational corpus, Table 2 tabulates the top 10 right collocates of *Wo*, regardless of its word class. Two general observations can be made. Firstly, the top 10 “*Wo* + right collocate” construction already accounts for 42% of all instances of agentive *Wo* found in my conversational corpus⁴. That is to say the high frequency of *Wo* in

⁴ Readers may be puzzled by the difference in total tokens of *Wo* in Table 1 compared to Table 2. This is because in Chinese, the form for agentive first person singular pronoun (equivalent to English “I”) and first person singular pronominal object (equivalent to English “me”) are undifferentiated, both uses the form *Wo*. In Table 1, the total tokens of agentive *Wo* and object *Wo* for both spoken and written corpus were compared, on the premise that the ratio of agentive *Wo* and object *Wo* in both corpora were more or less equal. Table 2 tabulates the top right

Chinese conversation can be accounted for by the repetitive usage of a limited number of top “*Wo* + right collocates” constructions, many of which are “*Wo* + verb of cognition” constructions. Secondly, within these constructions, *Wo Juede* is found to be the most common of all “I + verb predicate” construction with 243 instances. The most common right collocate *Jiu* (就) is actually a prolific adverb with multiple meaning that can be placed before a wide range of verb predicates. In a nutshell, we have evidence to support that similar to conversational English, many “I + verb predicate” construction are bundled epistemic phrases frequently deployed in conversational Chinese, with the use of *Wo Juede* as one of the most frequent and productive. It remains for interactional linguists of Chinese to identify and describe what these discourse markers are, and what their function is within the interactive environment of Chinese conversation. The rest of my paper shall now focus on providing a detailed analysis *Wo Juede* constructions and a description of its interactive functions in Chinese conversation.

3. Predominant usage of *Wo Juede* as opinion-framing device to initiate assessment

As mentioned earlier, to do a more detailed conversation analytic examination of *Wo Juede*, this study analyzed 7 hours of audio and video recordings. By definition, *Wo Juede* constructions can either be positing either a personal feeling about something or a hedged opinion. Examination of the recordings shows that the difference between these two types can be primarily identified through the constituent that *Wo Juede* frames. Personal feelings are often expressed by an emotive verb signifying affective states after a *Wo Juede* phrase, for example⁵:

- A: 对。那- (.) 电影就是我看小说: 再看电影<我觉得特别:
 ‘Yes. Th- (.) movie I’ve seen its novel: before the movie< *I felt* very:’
- B: 失望
 ‘disappointed’
- A: 特失h望hh.
 ‘Very dis(h)appointed hh.’

collocates of agentive *Wo*, and hence we had to omit all instances of object *Wo* from our calculation of overall percentage.

⁵ My choice of a 2-line transcription omitting individual lexical and grammatical glosses, leaving only the Chinese orthography and translation, are due to page restrictions. Furthermore, as my analysis is more dependent on the sequence of talk, rather than the explication of individual lexical items, the short 2-line transcription should not pose a problem to understanding the examples. Basic transcription symbols follows conversation analytic practice set out by Gail Jefferson (2004).

In contrast, *Wo Juede* constructions positing hedged opinions are instances where the speaker can be heard to be commenting or evaluating, as opposed to expressing affect, such as “我觉得也未必呢 (*I think* that’s not necessarily so)”. However, there are a minimal number of instances in our recordings where it is clear from the discourse context that the speaker is actually conveying personal feelings even though no emotive verbs were used:

A: =对:难多了-< .hh 我感:觉当然我也觉得可能就是水平不好: 或者怎么样哈<我也不搞不清楚但是我想:: 可能 .hhh 我自己的感觉<凭我自己的感觉**我觉得**还是难多:了
 ‘=yes: much more difficult-< .hh I think of course I also think perhaps it’s just my poor standards: or something eh< I also d- couldn’t understand it but I thi::nk maybe .hhh my own feelings< based on my own feeling *I felt* it was still much more difficult’

Further quantitative analysis of these two types of *Wo Juede* shows that their frequency of usage is highly skewed towards utilizing *Wo Juede* primarily as an opinion-framing device. By exhaustively examining 7 hours of conversational Chinese data and extracting all instances of *Wo Juede*, I gathered a collection of 83 *Wo Juede* constructions used within an interactive context. The sequential environments in which these *Wo Juede* appeared were then transcribed for further detailed analysis.

It is noteworthy that out of 83 tokens, only 15 were of the “*I feel*” type positing affective states and personal feelings. Additionally, we also found a single instance where 2 tokens of *Wo Juede* were in neither of the two prototypical usages defined above. In this instance, *Wo Juede* occurred in a question format to rebut in an accusatory tone:

A: **我觉得**怎么不合适啊。 **我觉得**你在石晶那儿住的时间长是吗
 ‘In what way did *I think* it unsuitable? *I think* you’ve stayed too long at Shi Jing’s place, is it?’

Revealingly, the great majority of *Wo Juede* (66 tokens) were used as opinion-framing devices. While *Wo Juede* positing affective states and personal feelings are not rare, we take a statistical point of view that it is the opinion-framing *Wo Juede* which constitute the frequent and significant usage in conversational Chinese. This study shall thus focus on the use of *Wo Juede* that does epistemic stance-taking, and locate its discourse-pragmatic functions within an interactive context. Correspondingly, we have omitted the 17 non-typical tokens of *Wo Juede* and the remaining 66 instances were further examined for *Wo Juede*’s primary interactive functions.

Two technical observations can be made about *Wo Juede*’s **position** and **composition** within an interactive sequential environment when used to frame opinions. By composition, we mean that the deployment of *Wo Juede* can be made in a TCU-initial position (i.e. before the proposition framed), such as “**我觉得**他得自己寄材料 (*I think he has to mail the materials himself*)”, or TCU-final position (i.e. after the proposition framed), such as “你们现在学校还是富**我觉得** (*Your school now is still rich I think*)”.

Typically, TCU-initial and TCU-final *Wo Juede* are prosodically marked. TCU-initial *Wo Juede* occurs at the start of a new TCU, usually marked with a pitch reset and the whole *Wo Juede* construction occupy a full IU (intonation unit). Here the recipient can hear an upward and incomplete intonation contour at the end of *Wo Juede*, signifying more talk is upcoming and that *Wo Juede* is made relevant to the upcoming talk. TCU-final *Wo Juede*, on the other hand, are typically “added” after a possibly complete TCU, prosodically marked by lower pitch, reduced loudness and a quickened tempo. This informs the recipient that the deployment of *Wo Juede* is “latched onto” the preceding TCU and is meant to frame it as opposed to starting a new TCU.

By position, we refer to the position of the *Wo Juede* construction within an interactive sequential environment as being responsive to a previous opinion/assessment, or the *Wo Juede* construction being the initiator of a new opinion/assessment. The term “assessment” is used generically to refer to any opinion framed by *Wo Juede*. The use of this term follows Pomerantz’s (1984) analysis on using preferred or dispreferred next assessment, and is chosen to highlight the responsive nature of differing assessments within sequential talk. As with Pomerantz (1984), we are able to clearly demarcate the use of *Wo Juede* as self-initiating a 1st assessment, or as a responsive 2nd assessment. At this point, it bears to reiterate that 1st or 2nd assessments are not simply positionally defined, but sequentially organized. By this I mean that a next TCU assessing a similar topic is not necessarily a 2nd assessment. For an assessment to be defined as a 2nd, it must be seen to be *a responsive next* to a 1st assessment about a common topic, necessitating a turn transition or change in speaker. Therefore a speaker within his own current turn may continually frame multiple 1st assessments using *Wo Juede* to opine on different topics or provide a different take on a similar topic.

Taking these two dimensions (the relative position of *Wo Juede* to its proposition, and the use of *Wo Juede* construction as 1st or 2nd assessment), we examined all 66 instances of *Wo Juede* construction and categorized them into Table 3.

Table 3: Distribution of opinion-framing *Wo Juede*

	<i>TCU-initial</i>	<i>TCU-final</i>	
<i>1st assessment</i>	50	9	59
<i>2nd assessment</i>	7	0	7
	57	9	

As with the usage of *I think* in conversational English investigated by Kärkäinen (2003), our results also found that the predominant usage of *Wo Juede* is as a TCU-initial stance marker, constituting 86.4% (57 out of 66) of all *Wo Juede* constructions used for framing opinions. The TCU-final usage of *Wo Juede* are often deployed as “after-thoughts”, self-motivated upon completion of an assessment, or other-motivated through lack of recipient response (denoting possible objection), or perhaps other paralinguistic cues necessitating the need to mitigate. These *Wo Juede*, though not extraordinary rare, is still

a very infrequent construction, and does not seem to considerably alter the more general interactive function of *Wo Juede*. Therefore, this study shall not focus on making a distinction based on its compositional difference, though a note on the use of TCU-final *Wo Juede* seems necessary.

Focusing on the positional dimension, it is found that the predominant usage of *Wo Juede* is to initiate a 1st assessment, almost 9 times as frequent when compared to doing a 2nd assessment, constituting 89.4% (59 out of 66) of all *Wo Juede* constructions used for framing opinions. A natural inference from this result is that *Wo Juede* is not primarily utilized to take a responsive next stance (2nd assessment) towards a prior assessment, but is itself more often pro-actively used to frame a 1st assessment in a certain way. My detailed analysis of *Wo Juede*'s interactive function shall concentrate on how and why it is utilized as a 1st assessment.

4. Using *Wo Juede* to preface possible upcoming disagreement/disalignment

By carefully analyzing the sequential environment where *Wo Juede* constructions are used to posit a 1st assessment, we find that they often occur in environment where the speaker is highly attuned to what he/she is about to proposed (these can occur as evaluations, suggestions or criticisms framed by *Wo Juede*) as being possibly disagreeable to the recipient.

For example, in a telephone conversation between couple Xiaojie and Xiaomin, the boyfriend Xiaojie suddenly shifts the topic to his impending visit to where Xiaomin is living by announcing his arrival schedule. The transcript starts with Xiaojie trying to remember his exact arrival time.

(1) *Housing 15.14*

- 01 小杰: 等我: 就是说:: (0.2) 我现在机票不在手边儿 .hh
 Xiaojie:wai:t I mean (0.2) I don't have the ticket at hands now .hh
- 02 我记得是八点十: 五到亚特兰大. 晚上
 I remember I'll be at Atlanta at eight fifteen. at night
- 03 小敏: 嗯 (0.2) 你要我去接你吗. 还是: (0.7)
 Xiaomin: nn (0.2) you want me to fetch you. or: (0.7)
- 04 → **我觉得:** 不- 不要我不去接你了吧.<让石晶去接你吧
I think, I better n- not go and see you.<let Shi Jing fetch you
- 05 小杰: 也行. 没关 [系
 Xiaojie:That's okay. No [problem

Lim: STANCE-TAKING WITH WO JUE DE

- 06 小敏: [因为 (.) 你要他要是: 接了我再去接你你
Xiaomin: [Because (.) if he: fetches me then go to you you
- 07 还是得:: 正正点就是 [至少半个小时啊]
still:: exactly [at least half an hour]
- 08 小杰: [怎么接了你再一] 噢你说他从班上喔
Xiaojie: [how come fetch you the-] oh you mean from class
- 09 小敏: 嗯嗯嗯
Xiaomin: yes yes yes
- 10 小杰: 没关系.可以.没问题
Xiaojie: Doesn't matter. Okay. No problem

Though no ethnographic detail is available to me about these two conversationalists, it is clear from examining the entire 30 minutes telephone conversation that the couple are currently involved in a long distance relationship, with both parties living in the U.S. With this basic information, and given that Xiaojie has decided his arrival time is newsworthy by announcing it, leaves for Xiaomin the question of “why that now”. Given their relationship, Xiaomin’s natural reading was that the announcement was made as an implicit request for her to welcome him at the airport. Notice then how line 03-04 was formulated to deny this possible request. After acknowledging receipt of the information, Xiaomin ask Xiaojie if he wanted her to go to the airport, but before a transition of turn could take place, Xiaomin self-selects to hold her turn with “还是: (or...)”, effectively preventing a proffered answer from Xiaojie. After a long pause of 0.7 seconds, Xiaomin finally broach the sensitive suggestion of herself not going to airport but to let Shi Jing alone go fetch Xiaojie instead. This is done using *Wo Juede* to frame her 1st assessment of what should be done. At line 05, although Xiaojie seems to readily accepts her suggestion, it is hearable that Xiaomin rushes to do further accounting from line 06-07 that it is inconvenient for Shi Jing to pick her up before going to the airport. Even though this sequence did not result in an eventual disagreement to the suggestion, the upshot from the above-described practices is simply that Xiaomin was acutely aware her suggestion was a sensitive one highly susceptible to disagreement. It is thus illuminating that *Wo Juede* was used to mark such anticipation to disalignment/disagreement by framing the focal line at 03-04.

In the next example, *Wo Juede* was used to frame a criticism. The following excerpt is from another telephone conversation between two female friends, Wangli and Lihong. Right before the start of the transcript, Wangli announced that she had gotten news that a mutual friend of theirs was pregnant, only to find Lihong updating her instead

that a baby boy has already been borne by this mutual friend. Wangli then expressed surprise at line 01.

(2) *Motherly 24.15*

- 01 王丽: 诶<=你怎么知道>的啊<
Wangli: Oh<=How did you >know<
- 02 李红: 我- 我听他们说啊. 我我那个: 哼他们. 都有. 打电话过来说嘛.
Lihong: I- I heard them say it. I I:: erm they. also. called me.
- 03 王丽: [是:]
Wangli: [oh:]
- 04 李红: [我听] 说但是我现在我也没跟他打电话因为我不知道
Lihong: [I heard] but I don't call her now because I don't know the
- 05 [他家的电话号码.
[number of her place
- 06 → 王丽: [**我觉得** 你- 你- 你那(h)儿的消息还挺灵通的啊. =
Wangli: [**I think**, y- y- y(h)our ability to gather news is quite amazing.=
- 07 李红: =呃因为我在(这儿) 毕竟还近一些嘛.
Lihong: =erm that's because I'm nearer (to them)
- 08 (.)
- 09 王丽: [对:]
Wangli: [yes]
- 10 李红: [就是说] 有有那个能拿他们有有人来了什么的就
Lihong: [I mean] there- when- when they come over for something, they'll
- 11 [是说 ()
[I mean ()
- 12 王丽: [就过去. 唉: 生个男孩
Wangli: [they just came over. Oh: they've a boy

The news of the birth of a baby boy by a mutual friend does not privilege epistemic authority for one friend over the other, assuming that the relationship of both parties to the mutual friend is more or less equal. However, from Lihong giving news of the birth in contrast to Wangli's news of pregnancy, shows that Lihong obviously has updated knowledge not accessible to Wangli, and hence of questionable epistemic authority. At line 01, Wangli's surprise at Lihong's access to this knowledge is not only evident in her forthright questioning, but also clearly audible in her high-pitched exclamation. In response at line 02 and line 04-05, Lihong's also seems to orient to this possibly questionable epistemic authority by downplaying her pro-activeness in acquiring information, and stating categorically that she does not have privileged access over Wangli. Even so, at our focal line 06, Wangli interrupts at a non-transition relevant place with a 1st assessment of Lihong's ability to "gather news". The evaluative term used for this assessment "还挺灵通的" is best described as "amazingly extensive", which is possibly disparaging and critical. Furthermore, this possibly disapproving assessment is doing a characterization of the recipient, making the move doubly liable to upcoming disagreement. Appreciably, this action is also initiated through the vehicle of a 1st assessment framed by a *Wo Juede*. Lihong then goes on from line 07 and line 10-11 to continually try to account for the assessment given at line 06, evidencing that it has indeed been heard as insinuatingly critical by the recipient.

The above two examples are clear instances in which speakers proactively used *Wo Juede* to hedge a possibly disagreeable proposition. However, it is plausible to construe of any initiated opinion, assessment or proposition as possibly disagreeable. The action of proffering a new opinion, assessment or proposition of any kind has the de facto consequence of positioning the speaker for possible disagreement/rejection/disalignment from the recipient, making the speaker susceptible to a dispreferred next turn. Thus the pro-active use of *Wo Juede* to hedge commitment on a proposition makes sense in the unenviable possible scenario of a disagreement. From this perspective, while *Wo Juede* as a frequent conversational practice may on the semantic level denote the epistemic stance of a speaker, it also functions interactionally to mark the speaker's proactive anticipation of possible disalignment/disagreement from the recipient, and also possibly pre-empting the recipient of what is about to be said as being disagreeable.

Unsurprisingly, all 7 instances of *Wo Juede* constructions as 2nd assessment were found to be in disagreement or disalignment with a prior 1st assessment. A typical example is given in the following exchange, again between couple Xiaojie and Xiaomin. In this segment, the main conversation topic revolved around looking for a suitable rental apartment for Xiaomin who was alone in a foreign city. The excerpt begins with the boyfriend Xiaojie assessing the rental cost of apartments after they have more or less discussed the merits of each apartment.

(3) *Housing 5.59*

- 01 小杰: 那- 就是说如果要论便宜的话可能还是那个: 吴晶他们那儿便宜.
Xiaojie: the- I mean if we're looking at price maybe that Wu Jing's place is still cheaper
- 02 小敏: 得了 [吧]
Xiaomin: Enough of that [((suggestive particle))]
- 03 小杰: [你就看] uh?
Xiaojie: [you just consider] uh?
- 04 → 小敏: 我 *我觉得* 也: 也未必呢
Xiaomin: I- *I think* that's not necessarily so
- 05 (0.4)
- 06 小杰: 怎么 [会呢]
Xiaojie: How is that [possible]
- 07 小敏: [因为你想你那个: utilities 你用的话]
Xiaomin: [because, you see, if you use the utilities]
- 08 小杰: 吴晶跟你说的什么utilities啊
Xiaojie: What has Wu Jing told you about utilities

In line 01 Xiaojie provides an initial assessment of Wu Jing's apartment as the cheapest overall and hence probably the most suitable choice. This is immediately countered by Xiaomin at line 02 with an overtly strong dismissal (grossly translated as “*Enough of that*”) of Xiaojie's initial assessment. However it can be seen that Xiaojie was not a prepared recipient of Xiaomin's talk at line 02 because he self-selects to continue his turn after possible completion at line 01, resulting in partial overlap of his TCU at line 03 with the end of line 02. It is possible that Xiaojie's ill-preparedness to receive line 02 has caused trouble in fully perceiving Xiaomin's dismissal, hence his initiation of repair with an open-class repair initiator *uh* after the overlap. However, it is also hearably the case that part of the dismissal at line 02 was spoken ‘in the clear’, and that was plausibly enough for Xiaojie to register the dismissal of his assessment. In any case, in the face of a highly dispreferred action (the dismissal of his assessment), repair-initiator *uh* at line 03 prefaces more upcoming possible disagreements. Our focal line 04 by Xiaomin is a 3rd turn repair, other-initiated by Xiaojie at line 03 and targets trouble-source at line 02. Though the repair proper at line 04 re-issues the disaligned 2nd assessment to a 1st assessment at line 01, it is also reformulated with *Wo Juede* to

mitigate the certainty of her disagreement. This reformulated mitigation is not only performed through *Wo Juede*, but also through the addition of adverbial “也未必 – not necessarily”. In essence line 04 has backed down from the original strong dismissal at line 02. After a significant 0.4 second gap of silence at line 05, Xiaojie pursues Xiaomin’s disaligned 2nd assessment by asking for an explanation for her disagreement at line 06.

Our focus is: what function does *Wo Juede* at line 04 perform in this exchange? It is undoubtedly so that this *Wo Juede* was hedging a dispreferred 2nd assessment (i.e. disagreement), but does is this instance of hedging a reflection of Xiaomin’s epistemic stance or is it better understood from by looking at its interactional function? Our sequential analysis of example (3) shows that it is in response to further disagreement prefaced by *uh* at line 03 that Xiaomin backs down from her original stance of strong dismissal to one that is mitigated by *Wo Juede*. As such it is improbable that the deployment of *Wo Juede* at line 04 signals that Xiaomin has suddenly had an actual ‘change of heart’ in her commitment that Wu Jing’s apartment is not the cheapest, which was strongly displayed with the dismissal at line 02. In fact at line 07, she continues to defend her conviction by posing utility bills as a factor that’s going to significantly increase the cost of renting Wu Jing’s apartment.

Summarily, we find that in conversation, there exist a multitude of circumstances in which proactive mitigation of an opinion would be preferable. These opinions or assessment can sometimes be projectably disaligned with the recipient’s own view, based not on the talk provided, but on para-linguistic factors that both speaker and recipient are aware of. Frequently, as a conversational practice, *Wo Juede* is deployed to satisfy this interactive need. As a 2nd assessment, *Wo Juede* prefaces the upcoming assessment as disaligned with the prior assessment. But when used predominantly as 1st assessment, *Wo Juede* constructions is shown to be the vehicle for a plethora of speech acts routinely found in everyday conversation, such as suggestion and criticism. Our analysis shows that while it continues to mitigate the proposition, such a move also *marks the speaker’s proactive anticipation of possible disalignment/disagreement from the recipient*, and also possibly pre-empting the recipient of what is about to be said as being disagreeable. It may then be instructive to note that from our examination of 7 hours of conversational data, *Wo Juede* does not appear uniformly. There is one 30-minute telephone conversation where *Wo Juede* did not appear at all, and a couple of continuous conversation where concentrated clusters of *Wo Juede* occur. These clusters are clearly in environment of disputes, or where participants are working jointly to reach a consensus on a certain topic.

5. *Wo Juede* as a Joint-assessment initiator

We argue that another reason why *Wo Juede* is used predominantly to posit a 1st assessment is that *Wo Juede* also functions interactionally to invite collaborative evaluation on the initiated proposition. In positing a hedged 1st assessment, *Wo Juede* not

- 04 → 采诗：没有因为我觉得我还蛮吃香的一点就是我眉毛还蛮浓的
 Caishi: no because ***I think*** an advantage I have is that my eyebrows are quite thick
- 05 (0.9)
- 06 采诗：好啦 (0.3) ° 对不 [起
 Caishi: okay (0.3) ° Sor[ry
- 07 [((audience laughter))
- 08 小S：眉毛浓是真::的啊
 Xiao S: (but) it's true your eyebrows are thick

Xiao S's candidate understanding of Caishi being unhesitant at all in receiving the notice to appear on TV without makeup at line 01 was aimed at an implicit accusation of Caishi being over-confidence of her natural looks, and thereby appearing pompous. To this, Caishi rushes in to mitigate such an image by saying removing make-up in public isn't such a big deal at line 02, resulting in slight overlap. At line 03, Xiao S continues to push this agenda by overtly proposing another candidate understanding of Caishi as being "very confident" and ends with the tag question to secure her recipient's answer. Again, Caishi attempts to deflect this with an initial weak negation, before using *Wo Juede* to propose that her advantage, and hence her valid confidence, was that her eyebrows appeared thick even without make-up. At this point, there was an extremely long gap of 0.9 seconds at line 05 after the use of *Wo Juede*, with no uptake of a collaborative assessment from anyone. Thus it is revealing that at line 06, Caishi has taken the prior non-uptake of a 2nd assessment at line 05 as a disagreement to her proposition framed by *Wo Juede* at line 04, by responding with a back-down and a apology (presumably for incorrectly proposing she had an advantage.). Line 08 is also illuminating in that the hostess Xiao S then acknowledges Caishi's thick eyebrows, but glaringly fails to acknowledge the advantage she had proposed at line 04. Here we see how *Wo Juede* has initiated joint-assessment but resulted in a non-uptake from co-participants. Analytically, the back-down at line 06 triggered by non-uptake at line 05 is only understandable on the premise that a 2nd assessment has been made *conditionally relevant* in line 05 after *Wo Juede* posited the 1st assessment at line 04.

Throughout this study I have characterized *Wo Juede* as a pre-emptive move anticipating upcoming possible disagreement, as well as an initiator of joint-assessment. This may have erroneously shaped the impression that a disaligned 2nd assessment is the norm after a 1st assessment using *Wo Juede*. However the fact is, most initiation of proposition by *Wo Juede* actually progressed smoothly into co-participants jumping in with aligned agreements. In other words, by using *Wo Juede*, the speaker is actually working to successfully garner co-participants' validation of one's own 1st assessment at

a minimal cost. In one final revealing example, we see how *Wo Juede*'s interactive function to invite joint-assessment can be manipulated to achieve other actions and interactive goals.

In example (5), taken through a video-recording of 4 participants over home-made lunch, one couple Wangdong (W.D.) and Yuqi has invited another couple friend, Xiaoxie and Liuyu over for a hotpot meal. While in a state of incipient talk, Yuqi suddenly initiates a new sequence, as indicated by her initial particle (诶 or translated as 'oh') at line 01 projecting an unanticipated line of conversation.

(5) *Fishing for Compliments*

- 01 → 雨琦: 诶其实>我觉得<这个菜还挺好吃的吼
 Yuqi: Oh actually >*I think*< this vegetable is quite nice right
- 02 王东: 嗯: =
 W.D.: nn: = ((agreement particle))
- 03 刘宇: = 嗯:: [:
 Liuyu: = nn:: [:
- 04 雨琦: [我不知道买什么菜我就买了这个菜 [()
 Yuqi: [I didn't know what to buy so I bought this one [()
- 05 刘宇: [° 对.这个菜特别进味儿
 Liuyu: [° yes. This vegetable is especially tasty
- 06 雨琦: 嗯
 Yuqi: nn ((agreement particle))

At focal line 01, Yuqi initiates a *Wo Juede* as 1st assessment of the green vegetables they had been eating from the hotpot. In the video, it can be seen that as the utterance comes to an end at line 01, Yuqi's final gaze was directed at her husband Wangdong, selecting him as the proper recipient of her assessment, though the utterance itself was devoid of any proper names or pronominal mentioning of a selected recipient. Hence at line 02, Wangdong provides the 2nd assessment in the form of a standard agreement token “嗯”. However Yuqi's long time friend Liuyu also respond at line 03 to the 1st assessment despite not being selected as the recipient. Video analysis shows that as Yuqi was doing the 1st assessment at line 01, Liuyu was focused on her bowl with her gaze downwards, preventing her from accurately gauging who the proper recipient of line 01 is. By the time she lifts her gaze towards Yuqi, Yuqi had already completed her utterance and diverted her own gaze from Wangdong as well. Nevertheless, it seems that

the 1st assessment using *Wo Juede* at line 01 had implicated Liuyu's additional agreement token at line 03, despite her lack of knowledge on who the recipient is. In contrast, Liuyu's husband Xiaoxie who is also seen in the video, had full access to Yuqi's gaze and hence did not respond to line 01. By the start of line 04, Yuqi has already shifted her gaze towards Liuyu (due to her prolonged responsive agreement token at line 03) selecting her to be the recipient of line 04, and proceed to state nonchalantly that she had instinctively chosen this type of vegetable despite not knowing which kind to buy.

Notice that line 01-04 is an extremely interesting sequence on how *Wo Juede* is utilized to partially accomplish what can be idiomatically characterized as “fishing for compliments”. By initiating a 1st assessment using *Wo Juede*, Yuqi can first safely gather joint agreement on her assessment that the vegetables they are eating is commendable, before launching line 04 to reveal that she was the one who had bought it. The implications of such a sequence is not lost on Liuyu, who immediately provides an upgraded assessment (from 挺好吃的 (quite good) to 特别进味儿 (especially tasty)) of the vegetables at line 05, thus implicatively complimenting that Yuqi had made an excellent decision. A likely hypothesis is that should 1st assessment with *Wo Juede* at line 01 fail to solicit favorable responses, then Yuqi would have had the option not to proceed with line 04 revealing her possibly poor choice of vegetable. In other words, we see here that the use of *Wo Juede* accomplishing lack of commitment to a assessment is plausibly not an indication of the speaker's actual belief, but in service of an interactive need, that of garnering co-participants' validation in her assessment. In this case, we can see that *Wo Juede* has been utilized to “check the bath-water”, or *to minimized cost of proffering an opinion (in terms of possibly being disagreed upon) with its hedging property, while at the same time securing joint-assessments from co-participants*. This pro-active approach in using *Wo Juede* can prove relevant in a wide-ranging spectrum of conversational actions.

6. Conclusion

Stance-taking has been a recent topic of importance for linguistics. In particular, most studies have been centrally concerned with the stance of epistemicity, and the forms that it takes in language. Furthermore, it has been shown that stance-taking is especially prevalent in the conversation register, and that the verb complement construction is the primary form of epistemic stance-taking in conversation. How do these findings correspond with Mandarin Chinese? Preliminary investigation of conversational Chinese provides strong evidence that the “I + verb predicate” epistemic phrase is also the predominant structure used. Distinctively, *Wo Juede* is one of the most used epistemic phrases as attested by our quantitative corpus analysis. However, qualitative conversational analysis has also shown that speakers' epistemic stance may not be the underlying motivation driving the frequencies. It is the interactional need between conversationalists to achieve collaborative assessment at a minimal cost that has made *Wo Juede* constructions such a regular and routinized occurrence.

Our analysis indicates that the predominant use of *Wo Juede* can be better understood as a pre-emptive hedging in anticipation of disalignment/disagreement from the recipient. Furthermore, as a 1st assessment, *Wo Juede* constructions also act to invite joint assessment. We can also see how both interactive functions work inter-dependently as participants need to progressively work towards mutual consensus while providing for contingencies of “negative face”. This study indicates that apart from ascribing epistemic phrases as a reflection of the speaker’s inner state of mind (i.e. epistemic state), routinized practices should be investigated through the interactive functions they accomplished in conversation.

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