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Hedging in search of solidarity

– The role of *Wo Jue De* (我觉得) in women’s language

Ni Eng Lim

1 Introduction

Are hedges primarily “women’s language”? Are they indicative of powerlessness? Early gender linguistic studies have commonly identified hedges in general as a female register symptomatic of “powerlessness” in women’s language. My research introduces new data from Mandarin Chinese in exploration of this problem. Specifically, we will look at the usage of a highly frequent hedge and complement-talking epistemic phrase in everyday spontaneous conversation - *Wo Jue De* (我觉得), literally translated as “I think”, and show that it is primarily a female register. More importantly, the present paper integrates an understanding of *Wo Jue De* from its interactional function, and addresses the question of *why* do Mandarin Chinese speakers use *Wo Jue De* (and correspondingly why women used it more).

A finding from conversation analytic research (CA) is that one of the most important human conducts in daily interaction is to constantly foreshadow or project what unit or action will come next in the unfolding speech (Sacks et al. 1974; Schegloff 1980, 1990, 2007). By doing so, interactants prepare one another for possible trajectories in speech, allowing them to collaborate with each other to organize coordinated actions in the subsequent course of interaction, and to ensure that the interaction can be successfully accomplished. The components available to foreshadow or project, aka ‘prefaces’, can range from nonverbal resources, such as gesture or eye gaze (Kendon et al. 1976; Goodwin 1986), to verbal resources; the latter can range from minimal units like *uh* and

well (Pomerantz 1984; Schegloff & Lerner 2004) to fully developed pre-sequences such as, *can I ask you a question?* (Drew 1984; Schegloff 1980, 1990).

By subjecting *Wo Jue De* to qualitative conversation analytic scrutiny, we were also able to achieve a deeper understanding of how an individual hedge can be doing something more than simply expressing uncertainty of opinion. Interactionally, *Wo Jue De* frames a hedged first assessment, but more critically acts as the vehicle to invite a second assessment to the first assessment proffered, thereby achieving the collaborative action of a joint-assessment on a certain proposition. From this perspective, we posit that *Wo Jue De* is a specific interactional resource that allows women to *achieve others' validation of own proposition*, while providing room for possible disagreement by also acting as a hedge. Thus, the frequent use of the hedge *Wo Jue De* by women can at best only be inferred as a gendered preference for solidarity and agreement. Based on the above analysis, I strongly refute the crude treatment of all hedges as indicative of women's "powerless language".

This study is based on 8 continuous audio-recordings of telephone conversation extracted from a corpus of spoken Chinese conversation (CallFriend)¹, each about 30 minutes in length, accumulating to approximately 4 hours of conversational data. All interlocutors in the database were engaged in everyday conversation on a variety of topics such as taking the TOEFL test, problems with raising a child, discussing apartments for rental, school life etc. All instances of *Wo Jue De* were extracted and transcribed together with its sequential environment to provide the foundation for close

¹ The corpus of spoken Chinese (CallFriend) has approximately 200,000 characters, consisting of 60 unscripted telephone conversations, lasting between 5 and 30 minutes. 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.

qualitative analysis. Statistical data were also collated to provide quantitative evidence on the gendered preferences of *Wo Jue De*.

2 Quantitative Analysis of *Wo Jue De* in conversation

At this point, there may be reservations as to why even investigate *Wo Jue De* as a coherent lexical bundle (as opposed to other frequent phrases also used as hedges). My previous study (Lim 2009) has shown that many “I + cognitive verb” construction in conversational Mandarin Chinese acts as autonomous epistemic stance marker frequently deployed to accomplish various interactive functions in conversational discourse. In my statistical analysis of top collocates of *Wo* (我) when used in the agentive position², it is found that *Wo Jue De* as a lexical bundle is the second most common occurrence of *Wo* in everyday conversation. Such a phenomenon is also prevalent in English where it is found that the ‘chunking’ of “I + verbs of cognition/verbal process” as a form of discourse marker constitute a striking percentage in conversational data (Thompson & Mulac 1991, Biber et al. 1999, Scheibman 2002, Kärkäinen 2003). As such, we have strong evidence to believe that *Wo Jue De* is a significant discourse marker and an important complement-framing device in conversational Mandarin Chinese.

To begin, the most literal definition of *Jue De* (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 *Jue De*'s

² 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*. Therefore *Wo* can be utilized to be the agentive subject, the patient object, the possessive pronoun or the prepositional object.

primary semantic definition. The other recorded definition of *Jue De* 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 *Jue De* is expressed as uncertain (语气较不肯定). Hence, together with first person pronoun *Wo* (我), we can basically translate *Wo Jue De* (我觉得) as “I think” or “I feel”, positing either a hedged opinion or a personal feeling about something. However, perhaps even contrary to common perception, these two types of *Wo Jue De* are not equally found in everyday usage.

From my conversational database, a total of 70 instances of *Wo Jue De* were found. Out of these, only 17 (24%) were used to express an affective state, personal feeling about something or some non-typical usage³. Significantly, the majority of *Wo Jue De* (53 instances or 76%) was found to be heavily skewed towards positing some sort of opinion. A preliminary conclusion from this result is that although both usages are possible, *Wo Jue De* is primarily used in everyday talk to preface an upcoming opinion (future mentions of *Wo Jue De* in this paper specifically reference this primary usage), with hedging as part of its function. Taking these 53 counts of *Wo Jue De* as hedged opinions, I further tagged them as male or female speech, and within mixed- or same-sex dyads conversation. In our 8 telephone conversation, we found 126 mins and 20 secs of conversation between women, 48 mins and 21 secs between men, and 60 mins and 19 secs between a women and a man. The two tables below tabulate our results:

³ By non-typical usage, I mean to indicate that a single ad-hoc instance of *Wo Jue De* was found in the database speech acts that do not posit hedged opinions or personal feelings. In this instance, *Wo Jue De* was used in a question format to query the recipient on what she thought the speaker felt about a situation.

Table 1: Raw Frequency of WO JUE DE in 8 telephone conversations

<u>Dyads</u>	<u>Duration</u>	Male	Female
Female-Male	(60 mins 19 secs)	11	9
Male-Male	(48 mins 21 secs)	1	N/A
Female-Female	(126 mins 20 secs)	N/A	32

Table 2: Frequency of WO JUE DE per hour (normalized frequency)

<u>Dyads</u>	Male	Female
Female-Male	10.94	8.95
Male-Male	1.24	N/A
Female-Female	N/A	15.20

Table 1 collates the raw frequency of *Wo Jue De* as uttered by either female or male within their specific dyad, while **Table 2** normalized the frequency to show the number of *Wo Jue De* spoken per hour. A quick comparison elicits the following observations:

- 1) Within same-sex dyads, the frequency of *Wo Jue De* used is strikingly disparate. In conversations between males, there is an average of 1.24 *Wo Jue De* used per hour, whereas in conversations between females, the average *Wo Jue De* used per hour is as high as 15.20, many times over the male-male dyad conversation. Additionally, it bears pointing out that the frequency of *Wo Jue De* used between males is remarkably low in raw statistical terms, with a singular use found in nearly 50 minutes of conversation. Based purely on statistical results, we already have strong evidence that *Wo Jue De* is indeed a female register.
- 2) However, the above point also cast doubt on hedges as being an indication of “powerless language”. The perception of hedges in women’s language as being powerless is built upon deference of opinion to the other more powerful figure, presumably the male gender in feminist literature. Such an explanation

cannot account for the extremely high frequency of *Wo Jue De* found in talk between females. Furthermore in my database, all female-female dyad conversations were between peers and friends on equal standing. Therefore it is problematic to simply ascribe a hedge, such as *Wo Jue De*, as symptomatic of being “powerless”.

- 3) The mixed-sex dyad conversation also provided us with interesting results. Firstly, the cumulative average frequency of *Wo Jue De* in female-male dyad conversation (≈ 19.89) is more than in female-female conversation (15.29), though not significantly more. Secondly, within the mixed-sex dyad, it is the male gender that actually has a marginally higher frequency of *Wo Jue De* usage, though again not significantly higher. Although both observations are not statistically significant, when compared to the remarkably low frequency of *Wo Jue De* in the male-male dyad, this strongly suggests that the male gender is oriented to significantly use more *Wo Jue De* in the presence of a female recipient.
- 4) Point (3) also lends further support to point (2) above, quantitatively rejecting “powerlessness” as the general over-arching characterization of hedges. For if such a characterization were true, then we would have to accept the paradoxical charge that the male gender is highly oriented to display their “powerlessness” and deference of opinion towards the female, at least in the case of Mandarin Chinese.

In sum, our statistical analysis has provided strong evidence that *Wo Jue De* is primarily a female register, meaning that the female gender exhibits a clear and strong preference to use this discourse marker. Yet by such a claim, I do not imply that the male gender displays a corresponding aversion to its usage. Much depends on the context of spoken discourse. Between males, there appear to be little impetus or none at all to preface opinions with *Wo Jue De*. However when speaking to a female, the quantitative results show that men do exponentially increase their use of *Wo Jue De* to frame opinions to achieve a certain function. The question then is: what exactly is this function? Our above analysis has shown that defining *Wo Jue De* simply as a hedge functioning to display the individual's uncertainty and "powerlessness" is an inaccurate description, and does not agree with our statistical results. The fact that males are oriented to use *Wo Jue De* more in the face of a female recipient suggests that the actual function of *Wo Jue De* does not lie unilaterally in an individual's mind or in the surface semantics of *Wo Jue De*, but is sensitive to its interactional context. The detailed explication of how *Wo Jue De* functions *interactionally* will in fact be crucial to understanding the skewed distribution of *Wo Jue De* between female and male within different dyadic conversation.

3 Qualitative Analysis of *Wo Jue De* in conversation

The interactional functions of *Wo Jue De* is well-documented in my recent paper (Lim 2009), showing that it is inadequate to construe *Wo Jue De* simply as a hedging device used to frame an assessment or an opinion. This study uncovered two main points that will have a bearing on our later analysis:

(a) By carefully analyzing its sequential environment, we found that *Wo Jue De* is not only primarily used to frame an upcoming opinion, it is also more frequently used to initiate the 1st opinion (or henceforth termed assessment) within environments in which such a 1st assessment is possibly disagreeable to the recipient. In other words, *Wo Jue De* 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 hedge a new 1st assessment as a pre-emptive move in the face of possible disagreement.

(b) Another reason for *Wo Jue De* to be used predominantly to posit a 1st assessment is that *Wo Jue De* functions *interactionally* to invite collaborative assessment on the initiated proposition. In positing a 1st assessment, *Wo Jue De* not only allows but also invites the recipient of this 1st assessment to make a relevant 2nd assessment on the proposition framed by *Wo Jue De*. By inviting for a 2nd assessment, I mean to suggest that the use of *Wo Jue De* acts to make a 2nd assessment from the recipient *conditionally relevant*, in the sense that should a 2nd assessment not be proffered after a 1st assessment posited by *Wo Jue De*, such an absence is made out to be meaningful and consequential. Hence, I have termed *Wo Jue De* as a joint-assessment initiator.

As our understanding of how and why *Wo Jue De* is principally a female register turns critically on the above two premise, in this section I shall briefly reiterate some of my arguments found in my previous study.

3.1 *Wo Jue De* as prefacing possibly disagreeable 1st assessment

As mentioned, within its sequential environment, we have found *Wo Jue De* to be predominantly used as a 1st assessment to posit a new proposition. By exhaustively

analyzing each instance of *Wo Jue De* in my conversational database (inclusive of ad-hoc video recordings of multi-party interaction), it was found that *Wo Jue De* as 1st assessment constitutes an extraordinarily high 89.4% of all instances (Lim 2009). Furthermore, it was found that a noticeable number of these *Wo Jue De* occurred in environment where the speaker is highly attuned to what he/she is about to proposed (opinion/assessment framed by *Wo Jue De*) as being possibly disagreeable to the recipient. In other words, by saying that *Wo Jue De* posits an opinion or an assessment is actually a highly generic description that encompassed other more specific and possibly disagreeable speech acts, such as a suggestion or a criticism.

For example, in a telephone conversation between couple Xiaojie and Xiaomin, after somewhat abruptly ending the discussion on the merits of different rental apartments without any clear consensus, the boyfriend Xiaojie suddenly shifts the topic to his impending visit to where girlfriend Xiaomin is living by announcing his arrival schedule. The transcript starts with Xiaojie trying to remember his exact arrival time.

Ex(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雅特兰达. 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
- 06 小敏: [因为 (.) 你要他要是: 接了我再去接你你
Xiaomin: [Becos (.) 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 is available to me about these two conversationalists, it is abundantly 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 news-worthy 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 Jue De* 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,

- 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 Jue De*.

The above two examples are clear instances in which speakers used *Wo Jue De* 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 Jue De* to hedge commitment to a proposition makes sense in the unenviable possible scenario of a disagreement. From this perspective, *Wo Jue De* as a frequent conversational practice does not necessarily denote the personal epistemic uncertainty of the speaker, but 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.

3.2 *Wo Jue De* as joint-assessment initiator

Another interactional function of *Wo Jue De* is to invite co-participants to collaboratively assess a proposition, or what I have termed *joint-assessment initiator*. The evidence for this is most cogent in cases where the 2nd assessment from the recipient of *Wo Jue De* is not forthcoming or absent. In a nutshell, we can see that speakers of *Wo Jue De* makes a joint 2nd assessment *conditionally relevant* because the withholding or absence of such 2nd assessment from recipient in the next turn after *Wo Jue De* triggers actions by the prior speaker *in view of this absence*. Thereby reflexively evidencing that *Wo Jue De* has indeed made a 2nd assessment conditionally relevant. Such actions may be in the form of non-talk in the sequence in wait for the 2nd assessment (gap), overtly

being over-confidence of her natural looks, and thereby appearing pompous. To this, Caishi rushed 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 Jue De* 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 Jue De*, 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 Jue De* 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 Jue De* has initiated joint-assessment but resulted in a non-uptake from co-participants. However 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 Jue De* posited the 1st assessment at line 04.

Throughout this study I have characterized *Wo Jue De* as a pre-emptive move to possible disagreement as well as an initiator of joint-assessment. Furthermore, I have shown a few examples of how a disaligned 2nd assessment did indeed transpired in its sequential environment. However the fact is most initiation of proposition by *Wo Jue De*

actually progressed smoothly into co-participants jumping in with aligned agreements. In other words, by using *Wo Jue De*, 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 Jue De*'s interactive function to invite joint-assessment can be manipulated to achieve other actions and interactive goals.

In Ex (4), taken through a video-recording of 4 participants over home-made lunch, one couple Wangdong 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 particle *Ei* (诶) at line 01.

Ex(4) 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.: mn: = ((agreement particle))
- 03 刘宇: =嗯:: [:
Liuyu: = mn:: [:
- 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: mn ((agreement particle))

At focal line 01, Yuqi initiates a *Wo Jue De* 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 (W.D.), 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 Jue De* 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 of Ex(4) is an extremely interesting sequence on how *Wo Jue De* is utilized to accomplish what can be idiomatically characterized as “fishing for compliments”. By initiating a 1st assessment using *Wo Jue De*, 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 Jue De* 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 Jue De* accomplishing lack of commitment to the assessment is plausibly not an indication of the speaker's actual belief, but in service of an interactional need, that of garnering co-participants' validation in her assessment. In this case, we can see that *Wo Jue De* 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 Jue De* can prove relevant in a wide-ranging spectrum of conversational actions.

4 Conclusion

Finally, we return to the gender question in our investigation, and how to bring the above qualitative analysis to bear on our understanding of the skewed distribution of *Wo Jue De* found in the different dyad conversations between men and women. In conversations between females, we have found the use of *Wo Jue De* to be most salient. However, this cannot be indicative of “powerlessness”. On the contrary, *Wo Jue De* should be understood as a pro-active move predominantly used by females to seek joint-assessment and establish mutual validation of each other's opinions. In effect, this desire to seek solidarity in talk is representative of what various scholars have termed the collaborative style of women's talk. Contrastively, the use of *Wo Jue De* in all male dyad conversation is extremely scarce. While we do not believe that exchange of opinions is

limited in male talk, it may be the case that men seek expression with less concern of possible adversarial confrontation or validation from others. Again, this is representative of the combative style of talk commonly ascribed to men. Interestingly, in our Mandarin Chinese data, the men actually sharply increase their use of *Wo Jue De* when speaking to the female gender. A possible explanation is that, for Mandarin Chinese at least, the male speaker has learnt to adopt *Wo Jue De* as a resource in the presence of a female recipient, orienting himself not to be overly “forceful” in presenting opinions, suggestions and other relevant assessments, by not only hedging his talk but also seeking the recipients’ contribution.

On another note, the theoretical implications of this study is that it is perhaps more productive not to generalize generic features within language as being directly indicative of some social-cultural phenomenon. In her indexicality theory, Elinor Ochs argues that gender and language actually represents an indirect constitutive relationship (Ochs 1992), which means that the link between a linguistics feature and gender is mediated through a more direct pragmatic meaning. Hence,

“The pursuit of such constitutive routes is a far more interesting activity than assessing either obligatory or probabilistic relations between language and sex of speaker/addressee/referent, for here we begin to understand pragmatic meanings of features and their complex relation to gender images.”⁴

Here, we see that though *Wo Jue De* is commonly perceived as a hedge, it actually performs a more interactive function. While I do not claim that all hedges function in different pragmatic ways, it is plausible to think that the repertoire of available hedges allows a diversity of functions beside hedging. To naively take women’s frequent use of

⁴ Ochs (1992) pp. 341

all hedges as a singular expression of her “powerlessness”, would be to ignore the workings of language in a interactive setting, and lose sight of how hedges can be a powerful resource for women to achieve their true motivation in conversation.

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