

Meaning in interaction:
The use of abstract nouns and the co-construction of stance in conversation

Chester Chen-Yu Hsieh
Graduate Institute of Linguistics,
National Taiwan University, Taiwan

Abstract

The current study aims to demonstrate how the use of a Chinese abstract noun, *yisi* ‘meaning, intention’, contributes to the conversation participants’ negotiation and co-construction of stance in interaction. As many researchers have rightly put forth, the idea of stance should be regarded as *stancetaking*, a dynamic, interactional and co-constructing process or activity, rather than a given, fixed standpoint (Du Bois 2007; Kärkkäinen 2006; Lempert 2008; Scheibman 2007; Wu 2004, among others). Instances of different grammatical categories that can index stance, such as complement-taking predicates, modal auxiliaries, adverbials and the like, have been well-discussed in the past literature (Biber and Finegan 1989; Englebretson 2007; Kärkkäinen 2003, 2006, 2007, Wu 2004, to name a few). However, the stancetaking function of nouns in conversation has seldom been addressed (see Charles 2003 for a discussion on the stance-constructing function of nouns in English academic writing). The current research intends to fill the gap by a case study on the use of a Chinese abstract noun, *yisi* ‘meaning, intention’, in conversation.

With the spoken data from three corpora, National Taiwan University (NTU) Mandarin Corpus, the Spoken Mandarin Corpus of NTU Cognitive Pragmatics Lab (NTU CoPra) and the NCCU Corpus of Spoken Chinese, we find that the use of *yisi* is largely related to the stancetaking act of the participants in conversation. Furthermore, both the speaker and the hearer can make use of the abstract noun, along with various co-occurring formulaic expressions or grammatical structures, to achieve different pragmatic and interpersonal functions. On the one hand, for the speaker, *yisi* can serve as an elaborating or clarifying marker, specifying his perspective on particular messages and/or refining or realigning his previous statement. On the other hand, the addressee can also utilize the noun either to show his understanding, saving the speaker’s positive face (Brown and Levinson 1987), or to express his difficulty in understanding, forcing the speaker to elaborate more on his statement and thereby participating in the negotiation of meaning and the establishment of stance in conversation.

This study is thus important in two ways. First, it advances our understanding of the mechanism of stancetaking in conversation, corroborating the idea that stance is

both dynamic and intersubjective. Second, it identifies the interpersonal functions of abstract nouns in conversation, a finding that can hardly be obtained by studies based on written data (cf. Charles 2003; Francis 1994; Schmid 2000, among others).

Keywords: stancetaking, abstract nouns, Mandarin Chinese, intersubjectivity

References:

- Biber, Douglas and Edward Finegan. 1989. Styles of stance in English: Lexical and grammatical marking of evidentiality and affect. *Text – Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of Discourse* 9 (1): 93-124.
- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. 1987. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Charles, Maggie. 2003. This mystery...': A corpus-based study of the use of nouns to construct stance in theses from two contrasting disciplines. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 2 (4): 313-326.
- Du Bois, John W. 2007. The stance triangle. *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, ed. by Robert Englebretson, 139-182. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Englebretson, Robert. 2007. *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Francis, 1994. G. Francis, Labelling discourse: An aspect of nominal-group lexical cohesion. *Advances in Written Text Analysis*, ed. by M. Coulthard, 83–101. London: Routledge.
- Kärkkäinen, Elise. 2003. *Epistemic Stance in English Conversation: A Description of its Interactional Functions, With a Focus on I Think*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Kärkkäinen, Elise. 2006. Stance taking in conversation: From subjectivity to intersubjectivity. *Text and Talk* 26 (6): 699-731.
- Kärkkäinen, Elise 2007. The role of *I guess* in conversational stancetaking. *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, ed. by Robert Englebretson, 183-219. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Lempert, Michael. 2008. The poetics of stance: Text-metricity, epistemicity, interaction. *Language in Society* 37, 569–592.
- Scheibman, Joanne. 2007. Subjective and intersubjective uses of generalizations in English conversations. *Stancetaking in Discourse: Subjectivity, Evaluation, Interaction*, ed. by Robert Englebretson, 111-138. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Schmid, Hans-Jörg. 2000. *English Abstract Nouns as Conceptual Shells: From*

Corpus to Cognition. Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Wu, Ruy-Juan. 2004. *Stance in Talk: A Conversation Analysis of Mandarin Final Particles*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins.