

# A Comparative Study of Social Deixis in Chinese and English from the Perspective of Rhetorical Authority

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## Abstract

Social deixis is concerned with the social status of the speaker/writer, the hearer/reader, or a third person referred to, as well as the relative social relationships between them. As a pragmatic symbol, it plays an crucial role in smooth communication, especially cross-cultural communication, and it can serve as a catalyst in interpersonal communication. However, it varies from culture to culture and thus it has different forms in different contexts of Chinese and English. In fact, social deixis involves a certain kind of rhetorical authority, which exerts some influences on the effect of communication carried out by the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. In this essay, we are to make a comparative study of social deixis in Chinese and English from the perspective of rhetorical authority, in order to gain implications to cross-communication.

**Keywords:** social deixis, rhetorical authority, Chinese, English, cross-communication

## 1. Introduction

As a pragmatic symbol, social deixis originates from ancient Greek and means demonstration or direction. Levinson (1983) subdivides it into five kinds on the basis of its features and appropriateness to the context, namely, personal, location, time, discourse and social deixis. The last kind will be the focus in this essay. Social deixis is a mirror of social communication, in which communicators will choose proper social deixis according to the communication object and situation, so as to reflect the social relationship and status between communicators. This kind of relationship or status can be viewed from rhetorical authority, which is distinguished by the superordinate's *right* to command and subordinate's *duty* to obey (Judith and Hemmings, 2007, p. 26). It may serve as the way of life of a traditional society or as specific as the pragmatic goals of a manufacturing organization. Meanwhile social deixis can serve as the catalyst to achieve this goal. For instance, if the speaker/writer is entitled "chairman" in an academic organization, he or she will subconsciously impose certain authority on the common members who need to adjust their speech acts to carry out a smooth communication between them. Therefore, social deixis is loaded with rhetorical authority, which delivers a kind of hidden coercion to the audience. However, research has shown that authority relations take strikingly different forms depending on a variety of contextual factors (Hemmings, 2003; Hemmings & Metz, 1990; Pace, 2003, 2006; Pace & Hemmings, 2006). Take Chinese context as an example, rhetorical authority of social deixis is quite different from that of English context. Therefore, communicators ought to choose appropriate social deixis in cross-cultural communication between China and English-speaking countries, so as to achieve acceptable communicative effects.

## 2. Social Deixis

### 2.1 *The Concept*

Many scholars in pragmatics have made some pioneering studies on social deixis. Fillmore (1971) points out that social deixis appears in the utterance between communicators, and the deixis information can be represented on the following occasions: (1) personal deixis, e.g. pronoun; (2) various utterance platforms, e.g. honorific phrase; (3) speech context; (4) people's names, work titles and relatives; (5) utterance forms of social acts, e.g. greeting, gratitude; (6) directional information transmitted by the speaker/writer to the hearer/reader. Levinson (1979, p. 206) argues that Fillmore's classification of social deixis is too broad and limits it into three areas: (1) the social identity of the speech act participators; (2) the social relationship between the speech act participators; (3) the relationship between the participators and others at the scene of speech act. However, Fillmore and Levinson mainly focus on the classifications of social deixis, and show no concern on the definition. He (2000, p. 35) defines social deixis as the words and grammar categories which can reflect the communicators' social face and relative social status.

Based on the previous studies, we are to analyze social deixis both in Chinese and English from the following sub-categories: (1) honorifics or humble expressions; (2) personal deixis; (3) forms of address.

## *2.2 Social Deixis and Culture*

Language is always loaded with culture. Social deixis is no exception. Manning (2001, p. 90) holds that social deixis is not merely a creature of the context of situation, but can have relevance to the broader transitional context of “society.” The society here means culture. People in the English-speaking countries such as America always feel weird if you call your colleagues at the position of Dean in a university “Dean” or “Professor”. The first day when I arrived at Denver and met my mentor for the first time, I called her “Professor” and also asked my little daughter to call her the same way. She was a little bit astounded because of the social deixis. I was especially awkward and wondered how my daughter greeted her with some social deixis, just because in China, for a distinguished professor in her sixties, the little child usually calls her 奶奶(Granny) , but it seems rather weird for a foreigner to be called this way. Thus, the cultural difference does exert some influence on the use of social deixis, and further on cross-cultural communication.

## **3. Theoretical Framework: Rhetorical Authority**

### *3.1 The Concept of Rhetorical Authority*

Authority is distinguished by the superordinate’s right to command and subordinate's duty to obey (Webber, 1947, p. 6). Webber also subdivides it according to different sources of legitimacy, namely, (1) traditional authority, which is build upon the traditional hierarchy of society and reflects the social relationship between order and obedience. (2) charismatic authority, which indicates that the audience can be influenced by someone's personal charm instead of the constriction of particular rules. (3) bureaucratic authority, which is built upon social position in particular governmental department. (4) professional authority, which can be achieved by professional knowledge in certain field. (5) moral authority, which is constrained by traditional moral power. We argue that the classification above is somewhat redundant, for instance, traditional authority overlaps with moral authority. Thus, we integrate them to the following: traditional moral authority, charismatic authority, bureaucratic authority and professional authority.

Every rhetor’s rhetorical success requires authority, for example, Some advertisements tend to resort to celebrities to guarantee their effects on the consumers. The more famous the celebrity for the ad is, the more charismatic authority he or she will be endowed with, and thus the more influence will be imposed on the audience, which is the so-called celebrity effect.

### *3.2 Coercion, Power and Rhetorical Authority*

Coercion is closely linked with persuasion, and is also part of the rhetorical process. When rhetors are constrained by rhetorical selection in the communicational process, coercion shows up and pushes persuasiveness to a less important position. Therefore, coercion is opposite to persuasion, but is always dependent on persuasion (James, 1970). Generally speaking, “rhetorical authority is inseparable from coercion.” (Arthur, 2004, P. 2) Coercion, involved in rhetorical authority, can promote successful persuasion. For instance, any product labeled with QS certification in China will transmit strong power of authority, which can

influence the consumers decision to buy them.

Power is another term relevant with authority. Liu (2004) holds that rhetoric, as a special tool or form, gives the audience in coercion an illusion of free will by the self-concealment of power mechanism

Therefore, the relationship between the rhetor and audience is redefined as a power one, which guides the rhetorical process. In the classification of power, Spencer-Oatey (1992) lists expert power as one kind, which can be deemed as a professional authority for the expert's power of knowledge. For example, on CCTV news channel, some experts are always invited to make some comments on important political or economic issues in China. They are invited because of their authority in that field or invisible power of their professional knowledge. Therefore, power can serve as guide for rhetorical acts.

#### **4. A Comparative Study of Social Deixis from Rhetorical Authority**

George Campbell (1963) points out that ethos, as a composite of identity and personal characteristics, is linked with authority. Any public discourse ought to employ both ethos and authority as precondition to enable its function. Social deixis, as an important symbol in public discourse, entails certain rhetorical authority and can be embodied in linguistic signal. For instance, in Korean, the verbal suffixes can express some information about social deixis, -so indicates authority, -na means intimacy. (Huang, 2007, P. 170)

Rhetorical authority is always invisible and permeates in the rhetorical process. It varies from context to context. In some occasions, if the rhetor's rhetorical authority is too powerful, the audience will not accept it, therefore, the smooth communication can not be achieved; whereas, if the rhetorical authority is too weak, the audience will not be influenced by the rhetor either, thus, the good communicative effect will be out of reach. As a critical part of communication, social deixis is particularly important to successful communication. Therefore, when choosing social deixis, we should focus on the rhetorical authority transmitted by social deixis.

Our analysis of social deixis in this paper is limited to the following aspects: (1) honorifics or humble expression; (2) personal deixis; (3) titles. We will select some concrete examples from both Chinese and English on the basis of rhetorical authority.

##### *4.1 Honorifics or Humble Expression*

Manning (2001, p. 89) holds that "typically, social deixis has been taken to mean systems of honorifics and other forms of non-referential indexicality by which interlocutors index aspects of their social context." The rhetorical authority carried by honorifics or humble expressions is usually reflected on the power of age, fortune, seniority and social position. The common power relations can be seen in father-son, superior-subordinate, teacher-student, employer-employee.

In China, it is common that the audience will greet the people with rhetorical authority, either in higher social hierarchy or in fortune, or in seniority, by honorifics which embodies the traditional moral authority, to be concrete. According to traditional Chinese moral standards,

those positioned in the lower stairs of social ladder ought to communicate with a respectful attitude towards those positioned in the higher ones. For instance,

(1) 有机会再拜读您的大作。

(I hope I will have the honor to read your paper or monograph one day.)

The “拜读” (have the honor to read) carries certain traditional moral authority, and reflects the power relation between the two parties of communication. Moreover, it can also reveal the addressee’s professional authority, which delivers a kind of coercion on the addresser.

In America, it is not very common to greet those people with higher rhetorical authority in terms of honorifics. Even talking with a famous professor in particular academic field, you can call his or her given name. Thus, the rhetorical authority does not play a decisive role in communication in America.

Humble expressions usually find their way in ancient China, such as “愚”(I), “家兄” (my brother). However, there are probably no counterparts in English. Humble expressions are employed to put the addressee’s social position onto high level, meanwhile lowering the addresser’s position. Thus, humble expressions also carry certain traditional moral authority. For example,

(2) 鄙人不才，无能为力。

(I am sorry I am incapable.)

“鄙人” (I) is viewed as honorific, which shows that the speaker/writer is humble enough to make the hearer/reader’s rhetorical authority prominent.

#### *4.2 Personal Deixis*

In most languages, there are usually two different second person singular form, such as tu/vous in French, du/sie in Germany, tu/vos in Spanish, 你/您 (you/you) in Chinese. However, English is an exception. There is no such personal deixis as “您” in English, but there are some similar counterparts, e.g. your majesty, your highness. How to use the personal deixis depends on the social context, speaker/writer’s emotion and cognition. For example, in China, 您 is often regarded as a respectful form of 你, and is used to greet the seniority, teachers or leaders; while 你 is employed when communicating with the peers. Actually, 您 transmits some rhetorical authority to the audience, namely, the speaker/writer is willing to respect the hearer/reader and to accept his or her views or thought. For instance,

(3) 李妈反说：“姑爷，晒衣服是娘儿们的事，您不用管。小姐大清早说出去办事了，您为什么不出去？这时候出去，晚上早点回来，不好么？”诸如此类，使他又好气又好笑。笑时称她为“李老太太”或者 Her Majesty，气时恨不能请她走。(摘自《围城》)

(Mama Li said: Master, sunning clothes is woman’s business. You need not worry about it. Young lady left early this morning to go to work. Why do not you go out? Would not be nicer if you went out now and came back a little earlier this evening? Incidents of this sort exasperated and amused him. When amused, he would call her “Madame Li” or “Her

majesty”; when exasperated, he wished he would just ask her to leave.) (Selected from *Fortress Besieged*)

Due to the master-servant relationship between Hongjian Fang and Maid Li, the maid calls Fang “您”, which carries traditional moral authority, to show respect for him. The authority subconsciously forces Maid Li to choose the personal deixis “您” to make appropriate communicational signal corresponding to her social status. If she selects the personal deixis “你” regardless of Fang’s rhetorical authority, then the communication failure may take place. Therefore, rhetorical authority can exert some influence on the selection of social deixis. Instead of “您”, your majesty or your (royal )highness may serve as the counterparts in English. However, these two expressions may always appear in upper noble society of such constitutional monarchical country as U.K. For instance,

(4) Elizabeth approached the king; “Your majesty has been very busy today. If you have no more tasks to undertake would you wish that we escort you safely to your royal chamber?” The king smiled broadly at Elizabeth and looked into her eyes. (*Pride and Prejudice*)

The traditional moral authority produced by “King” forces Elizabeth to title him as “your majesty”. In this way, it is similar as in Chinese.

#### 4.3 Forms of Address

Communicators always use forms of address to indicate the social relationship between the parties of communication and to clarify their social roles. Those forms are especially practical to promote smooth communication. For the classification, it is tricky to make a unity. Hu (1999) divides it into Kinship terms and social address forms, which is widely accepted by scholars in this field, particularly in China. Viewed from rhetorical authority, these forms of address entails a sense of authority, reflecting the power relationship between communicators. Communicators are advised to employ appropriate forms of address based on the rhetorical target they are facing.

Chinese and English both contains a large amount of forms of address, which has nearly the same social function. However, there are some minor discrepancy in their concrete usages in particular context.

##### 4.3.1 Kinship Terms

Kinship terms are used to demonstrate the addresser’s relationship with other family members. Concretely speaking, those terms can reflect the power relations and moreover the traditional moral authority, which can be embodied in Chinese particularly. If one communicator is endowed with higher traditional moral authority, then he or she will be titled as appropriate kinship terms by others involved in the same family communication. For example, there is a paragraph in *Hometown* by Lu Xun going as follows,

(4) 我这时很兴奋,但不知道怎么说才好,只是说:“啊!闰土哥,你来了?……他站住了,脸上现出欢喜和凄凉的神情,动着嘴唇,却没有作声,他的态度终于恭敬起来了,分明叫道:

“老爷!” ……

(When meeting Run Tu many years later, I was so excited that I did not know how to express my complicated feeling, saying: “Hi, Brother Run Tu.” He was also happy to see me, with a hidden dreariness, however. He moved his lips and meant to say something to me, just in a sudden he changed to greet me with “my lord” in a respectful tone.)

In this short paragraph, the relationship between “I” and Run Tu, once childhood friendship but now master and servant, is clearly portrayed. The change of social relationship forces Run Tu to address “I” as “my lord”, which reflects the power of traditional moral authority.

In English, the kinship terms are also employed to show the rhetorical authority of the people related, for example, in the chapter “It’s up to you” of *Family Album U.S.A.*, there is dialogue going as follows:

(5) Robbie: Nice to meet you, Dean Rafer.

Dean: Well, are you as good a tennis player as your dad?

Robbie: No, I am not very good at it.

“Dad”, as a kinship term, is loaded with certain traditional moral authority and professional authority, because on the one hand, “Dad” is Robbie’s father, and on the other hand, “Dad” is an expert on golf, for which Dean makes a comparison of “Dad” with Robbie. However, in an American family, it is not odd to call the father or mother's given name directly by the children, which does not mean that the kinship terms is devoid of rhetorical authority but indicates the intimacy of family members.

#### 4.3.2 Social Address Forms

Generally speaking, titles of an official and a technical post can function as social deixis, social address forms to be concrete. These forms can reveal the hierarchical relationship between communicators. In terms of rhetorical authority, social deixis carries certain authority in certain context. If the speaker/writer deserves the authoritative address forms, the hearer/reader can accept his or her viewpoints due to his or her knowledge and personal charm. For example, in the program “Seeking ancestor of human beings” by Discovery (June 12, 2006), the director frequently quotes the research carried out by Professor David Pilbeam, Professor Tim White and Professor Michael Brunet, because of their professional authority in paleoanthropologist. Thanks to the “professor” forms, the program produces some persuasive coercion on the audience.

##### 4.3.2.1 Names

Names are those address forms including such linguistic forms as family name or given name, which are used to distinguish one from another. For instance, “老李 (Senior Li)”, “小刘 (Junior Liu)” and “明明 (Ming ming)” in Chinese carries some authority by themselves and reflects different social power relationships. If one call somebody “老李 (Senior Li)”, then the interpersonal relationship between the communicators is at least friendship, which can show the speaker/writer's personal respect for the hearer/reader, and sometimes husband-wife,

which can indicate the intimacy between the couple. Thus, the rhetorical authority in the names is usually considered as traditional moral authority.

In English, there do exist names with the similar functions. For example, if one calls another “Sir Tom Cruse”, then the name carries high respect for Tom Cruse and meanwhile certain traditional moral authority, professional authority and bureaucratic authority in particular. If one calls another “Tommy”, then the name does not carry any rhetorical authority, just for the intimacy of friends or family members.

#### 4.3.2.2 Forms of technical and official posts

Forms of technical posts are employed to greet those experts in particular academic field, such as “professor”. Generally speaking, “professor” is more rhetorically authoritative than “lecturer”, because the technical post is a critical ingredient in academic field. See the following two notices in Chinese and English:

(6) 报告题目：中美人际沟通文化比较研究

报告时间：2015年7月24日（周五）下午15:00-17:00

报告地点：翻译学院会议室

报告主讲人：贾文山教授

主讲人简介：

贾文山，美国麻省大学传播学博士，富布莱特高级访问学者指导教师，现任杰普曼大学传播系终身教授、中国人民大学讲座教授、中国跨文化交际协会常务理事等，同时兼任《亚洲传播学刊》编委、清华大学《全球传媒评论》编委。

(Speech title: A Comparative Study of Interpersonal Communication Culture in China and the U.S.

Speech time: 3 pm-5 pm, 07/24/2015

Speech place: meeting room of School of translation studies

Speaker: Professor Wenshan Jia

Introduction of the speaker: Professor Jia is a doctor of communication in MIT, Fulbright senior visiting scholar advisor, and now a lifetime professor of communication in Chapman University, a guest professor of Renmin University of China. Jia also serves in such academic posts as executive member of China Cross-culture Association, editorial board members of Asian Journal of Communication and Global Media Review.)

(7) *Communication in the Late Age of Fossil Fuels: Scientific Certainty, Cruel Ironies, and Imaginative Solutions*

Dr. Phaedra C. Pezzullo

Associate Professor of Rhetoric & Public Culture, Department of Communication & Culture, Indiana University



In these two notices of speech, “doctor, professor, advisor, editorial board member” are used in the Chinese notice, while only “associate professor” is employed in English notice. All these forms of technical posts transmit high professional authority and cast some coercion on the would-be audience. However, the former one lists more address forms than the latter, which indicates that Chinese and English are different from each other in selecting social deixis for academic purposes.

Forms of official posts are used to indicate those cadres in the government, either in local or in state, such as 主席 (president), 省长(state governor), 市长(mayor), 处长(section chief). Just as Hanning (2001, p. 54) states, “there are forms of social deixis indexing perduring social relations rather than emergent situational ones.” Thus, usually the bureaucratic authority of president is stronger than that of the mayor in China; but this may be somewhat different in some occasions in America, because the U.S. is a federal government where each state is relatively independent in administration affairs.

#### 4.3.2.3 Occupational Address Forms

In different occupations, people are usually titled with certain address forms, such as “businessman”, “physician”, “teacher”. These forms carry professional authority in particular fields. If someone is a teacher of accounting in one famous university in China, he or she should have some authority in accounting and grasp the basic developmental trend of the discipline. If someone is granted with a physician in Denver Children Hospital, Colorado, he or she should be an expert in Children medical treatment. In terms of professional authority, the occupational address forms carry the similar functions in both Chinese and English.

However, occupational address forms in English are seldom used in concrete situations. It is common that American students greet their teacher with the given names instead of “teacher”, which is unacceptable in Chinese context. In China, teachers are highly respected and students are expected to show respect to teachers by greeting them with “Teacher Wang/Li/Zhang” for the occupational authority and traditional moral authority carried by the teacher.

### 4.4 Other Influential Parameters

#### 4.4.1 Context

Context serves an important factor in inference of linguistic functions. Hemmings (2003) holds that statistics show that authority relationship can be represented in different forms due to the contextual variation. Therefore, the rhetorical authority reflected by social deixis is not always permanent and variable from situation to situation. For example,

(8) Our tour manager was a quietly efficient, handsome lady, whose calm suggested those intrepid women who travelled these regions in the last century, and the lecturer was a young woman professor from Manchester University, who turned out to be an authority on mummification.

In (8), the tour manager is entitled with three different social address forms, namely, the lecturer (an occupational address form), woman professor (a form of technical post), an

authority on mummification (an occupational address form). Due to the tour, academic and commentary contexts constructed by “tour”, “professor”, “lecturer” respectively, the same people can be granted with different social deixis, indicating different rhetorical authorities and power relationships.

On the macro-level, cultural contexts in Chinese and English do play a critical role in the effect of rhetorical authority carried by social deixis. China has a different culture background from English-speaking countries. Those social deixis may exert some rhetorical authority on the audience in China but not on those in America. For example, “书记 (Party Secretary)” is rhetorically authoritative in China on different levels of the government, company or even universities, it does not produce the same effect on American, however.

#### 4.4.2 Politeness

Politeness is another parameter influencing rhetorical authority. Generally speaking, politeness is located on an important position in Chinese culture due to the Confucius educational conception. Some famous scholars in China greet the young students with such honorifics as “兄 (Brother)” to show respect to others, but the social deixis is irrelevant with authority, but with politeness.

In English, there are some similar social deixis which is related with politeness but not with authority. For instance,

(9) “Miss Bennet I am shocked and astonished. I expected to find a more reasonable young woman. But do not deceive yourself into a belief that I will ever recede. I shall not go away till you have given me the assurance I require.”

.....

“You have no regard, then, for the honor and credit of my nephew! Unfeeling, selfish girl! Do you not consider that a connection with you must disgrace him in the eyes of everybody?”

“Lady Catherine, I have nothing farther to say. You know my sentiments.”

In this example, “Lady Catherine” does not reflect some rhetorical authority, just because Elizabeth only expresses her great virtue before the Mrs. Catherine’s cruelty with this social deixis. In other words, this is a linguistic choice to demonstrate Elizabeth’s politeness virtue.

## 5. Conclusion

Social deixis is a catalyst for smooth communication. Therefore, communicators need to choose appropriate social deixis to promote the communication he or she is indulged in. However, in order to make a suitable choice, rhetorical authority of the social deixis is a critical factor to be considered. In this paper, we mainly make a comparison of social deixis in Chinese and English contexts from the lens of rhetorical authority. It is proved that there are some similarities and differences in the uses of social deixis in Chinese and English. Therefore, to conduct a successful cross-cultural communication, communicators need to be aware of the importance of social deixis and rhetorical authority.

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