

“I am sure but I hedge”: Fear
expression *kongpa* as a rhetorical
interactive strategy in Mandarin
conversation

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Emotions/Feelings

- At the forefront of interdisciplinary research, spanning the humanities, social sciences, and biological sciences (Wierzbicka, 1999).
- “Feelings are what matter most in life” (Charles Birch, 1995 ix).

Fear

- Although cultures across the world may vary in categorizing emotions and in their choice of verbal and non-verbal expressions, it is generally acknowledged that some of the “basic emotions” are linguistically recognized in all languages (Ekman, 1973; 1993; 1994a; 1994b; Wierzbicka, 1999).
- Among these “basic emotions” [*happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprise (Ekman, 1973: 219-220)*], fear, which deals with the potential negative impact of an upcoming event, is one of the essential human emotions across languages and cultures.

Fear

- One is in support of epistemic uncertainty, represented by Palmer (2001), arguing that fears, could be best treated as epistemic and fear expressions like English *I'm afraid that* express “little more than an unwelcome possibility”.
- Another branch of studies focuses with the pragmatic aspects fear expressions pointed out that the major function of fear is to prepare the addressee for the upcoming unwelcome but inevitable bad things (Leech, 1983).

Interpretation beyond its affective valence



- (1). 抻麵， 你 知道 嗎？
chēnmiàn nǐ zhīdào ma
hand-pulled.noodle 2SG know Q

這 個 外 地 人 恐 怕 也 不 知 道。
zhè gè wàidì rén kǒngpà yě bù zhīdào
this CL non-local people KONGPA also NEG know

‘Hand-pulled noodle, what is it? I’m **afraid** non-locals have no idea about it either.’
(1982 年北京话调查资料 Data from *collection of Beijing Dialect, 1982*)

- (2). But I **fear** that you may not be able to do that. (BNC: J9S 531)

Previous research--grammaticalization

Examined how *KONGPA* , originally as a **verb** develops into an **epistemic marker** serving as a subjective epistemic and inferential marker equivalent to English probably. In addition, Mandarin modal adverb *KONGPA* has further extended to serve **pragmatic hedging functions** such as marking speakers' doubt, reservation or hesitation, either as a means for the speaker to qualify his or her epistemic stance or for the speaker to express consideration for the addressee's face wants (Hui, 2009; Tang, 2010; Yap, Chor & Wang, 2012).

Previous research-- pragmatics

Zhuo and Kapatsinski's (2012) cross-linguistic research on pragmatic functions of fear expressions in English, Mandarin and Russian suggests that the usage of fear expressions (i.e. I am/I'm afraid and I fear in English, *KONGPA* in Mandarin and *bojus'* in Russian) strongly tint the proposition of a sentence with **high-certainty** rather than **low commitment**. They also pointed out that compare with its English and Russian counterparts, which are still been used to introduce undesirable events, Mandarin *KONGPA* has stepped into a more advanced level of pragmatics in the sense that it can be used to introduce **neutral or even positive events**, although the majority of its uses are still associated with unpleasant news.

Hedging

predicate adjectives or predicate nominals in declarative sentences/pragmatic concept (Lakoff, 1972)

Performative verbs such as *apologize*, *promise*, and *request* when preceded by specific modals such as *can*, *must*, and *should* (Fraser, 1975; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987)

Two types of hedging: approximators & shields (Prince et al., 1982)

Mitigation (Caffi, 1999, 2007)

A pervasive and important rhetorical strategy to linguistically attenuate the speaker's commitment to "either the full semantic membership of an expression (i.e. propositional hedging) or the full commitment to the force of the speech act being conveyed" (i.e. speech act hedging)/Pragmatic competence (Fraser, 2010)

Hedges are thus linguistic devices – lexical items, syntactic structures, prosodic features—reduce the full value which the utterance would have, absent the hedging.

Data

- An 85-hour face-to-face Mandarin conversational database (two TV interview/talkshow programmes)
- *Xiao Cui Shuo Shi* (小崔说事) 'Xiao Cui's Talk Show' (XCSS) and *Mian Dui Mian* (面对面) 'Face to face' (MDM).
- Although the two programmes vary in their dialogue features, both of them primarily follow question-and-answer style and are in interactional form.
- The participants of both the two programmes are native Mandarin speakers.
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Conclusions

- Applying the theory of hedging, this study investigated how modal adverb *KONGPA* is used in Mandarin conversation by linking **epistemic uncertainty** and potential **negative impact** of the related utterances together.
- High certainty rather than low commitment
- Negative polarity--the negative stance does not necessarily lie in the propositional content of the utterance itself, but emerges rather from the illocutionary act of the utterance.

Conclusions—cont.

- We argue it is the pragmatic consideration of avoiding unnecessary risks rather than epistemic uncertainty that often triggers the usage of *KONGPA* in face-to-face conversation.
- However, it is the ostensible uncertainty inherent to the meaning of *KONGPA* that helps accomplish its interpersonal function of hedging so as to achieve appropriate pragmatic effects.