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## A Study of the Forms of Direct Address Used by Contemporary Chinese College Students in Communication with College Teachers

**ABSTRACT.** *Language is a mirror of society. Forms of direct address, and specifically the most frequently used communication formulas which have been studied for quite a long time, reflect the changes and development of the country's politics, economy and culture. Alongside the development of information technology and other changes of modern times, Chinese social communication conditions are also constantly changing. Under the trend of diversification, the contemporary Chinese college students are deeply influenced by the mass media. Most of them are open-minded and sociable. They are not rigid in using the traditional terms of address in interpersonal communication. This paper studies full-time students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, China. The author uses questionnaires and statistical analysis to find out how the contemporary Chinese college students address college teachers and how well they know the traditional forms of direct address. The questionnaire showed that the choice of the forms of direct address largely depends on the social status of the interlocutor and the teacher-student relationships; and the students' realization of the importance of using the traditional forms of address vary greatly.*

**KEYWORDS:** *direct address; speech etiquette; teachers; colleges; Chinese students; language functions; conversational formulas.*

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### 1. Introduction

Address terms are used to refer directly to the listener. Address terms have always been regarded as “living fossils” by anthropologists. They record important information such as social structure, the imprint of the times and the values of social members in a certain period. From the comparison of address terms and address systems in different times, we can detect the changes of society, culture and values.

Under the trend of diversification, the contemporary Chinese college students are deeply influenced by the mass media, with more information, faster knowledge updating and strong acceptance of new things. Most of them are open-minded and sociable. They are not rigid in using traditional address terms in interpersonal communication. But there are also some students who have some defects in interpersonal communication, lack self-confidence and are very restrained in social occasions. Starting with the study of address terms, this paper attempts to explore the differences of address terms for the teachers of different positions, and students' self-knowledge of the use of address terms by investigating the use of address terms among college students.

### 2. Studies of Address Terms

#### 2.1. Sociolinguistic study of address terms

The sociolinguistic study of address terms began in the 1950s and 1960s. Its main purpose is to study the social significance and social attributes of address terms, to explore the norms and patterns of their use, and to examine the relationship between interpersonal relationships, social attributes of both sides of the conversation, emotions and psychology and the choice of address terms. More importantly, sociolinguistic studies also show that the semantic choice embodied in the form of address reflects the process of socialization of speech acts. At the same time, the study of this process also reveals how linguistic forms embody and generate social significance through the constraints of social factors and contexts. The multiple social and cultural factors involved in this process include social status, cultural traditions, ideology, religious beliefs, the rich and poor, racial differences, age and gender, professional nature, emotional changes and personal style.

#### 2.2. T/V Study

In many European languages, singular second personal pronouns can be divided into familiar form/informal form (T) and polite form/formal form (V), which originate from Tu and Vos in Lat-

in. Brown and Gilman argue that the use of T and V is governed by power and equality. Power and equality are the two most common and highly generalized interpersonal relationships in society, which together restrict people's mode of address in society. If there is a power gap between the two sides, the less powerful side uses V, the more powerful side uses T; the two sides with the same relationship use T; the two sides with the same power use T if they are close (that is, they have the same relationship), and both sides use V if they are alienated. However, in the western society, with the process of democratization, the equal relationship has taken the absolute advantage, restricting the power relationship. In addition, the usage of T and V is also influenced by national tradition, social structure and ideology, while the use of T and V can express personal transient emotions and attitudes.

### 2.3. Study of address terms in modern Chinese

Yao Yaping (1995) pointed out that the appellation system of modern Chinese has two basic trends: first, the simplification of appellation system and the equality of appellation concept; second, the emergence of general appellation terms. Since 1949, Chinese social address forms have been changing constantly. "Tongzhi (同志)" rose in the 1950s, and "Shifu (师傅)" became popular in the 1960s and 1970s. After the reform and opening up, "Xiansheng (先生), Xiaojie (小姐), Laoban (老板), Pengyou (朋友), Laoshi (老师)" were widely used. So far, there are still some problems in the Chinese address system, such as the absence of generic terms and the generalization of respectful terms. Because the generic terms in every society correspond to different social values, the current Chinese social structure is complex, and people's values are very different, so on many occasions people cannot find appropriate address terms to address and talk to each other, which is the main reason for the semantic generalization of address terms such as "Tongzhi (同志)", "Shifu (师傅)", and "Laoshi (老师)". However, with the change of social structure and people's values, great changes have taken place in the meaning and usage of "Tongzhi (同志)" and "Laoshi (老师)". In recent years, the use of "Tongzhi (同志)" and "Laoshi (老师)" has been greatly reduced due to the popularity of some new generic terms of address.

## 3. Pragmatic Functions of Address Terms

Language communication is an action process; conversation is an action in situation, and address is an interactive action in conversation. Address terms play a very important role in people's daily communication. They are closely relat-

ed to society and can reflect various social relations of communicators, including identity, status, social distance and power. The choice and use of address terms are closely related to the context. Different address terms can reflect the subtle differences in the speaker's psychology.

### 3.1. Politeness principle

In daily verbal communication, both improper use of language and rude speech will lead to misunderstanding and even failure of communication. Therefore, expressing politeness in language is a common means of normal communication and an important pragmatic principle in language communication. Leech (1983) proposed the politeness principle based on Grice (1967) cooperation principle, including six criteria: appropriateness criterion, generosity criterion, praise criterion, humility criterion, consistency criterion and compassion criterion.

Politeness is a common phenomenon, all ethnic groups pay attention to it, but the ways of expressing politeness are different. Gu Yueguo (1992) put forward some politeness criteria with Chinese characteristics according to the four politeness characteristics of Chinese language and culture, namely, the self-denigration maxim, the address-term maxim and the refinement maxim.

Address terms are an important factor in the normal development of language. The use of address terms also follows the principle of politeness. According to Leech's and Gu's politeness principles, the functions of address terms can be divided into two aspects: basic function and special function.

### 3.2. Basic function

The basic function of address terms is characterized by the fact that both sides of communication can easily understand the function of address terms from the literal meaning of the words. According to the politeness principle, it can be further classified into the following functions: vocative function, discourse prompting function, expressing courtesy or respecting function, role identity function. Vocative function refers to the function to attract the other party's attention or clarify the object of discourse. Discourse prompting function refers to the function that the speaker draws the attention of the listener and prepares for the next communicative activities in advance. The function of expressing courtesy or respect refers to the speaker's courtesy or respect for the listener. The role identity function refers to the speaker referring to the other party with a specific address, indicating that he or she identifies with the other party's social role, position, occupation, gender and age.

### 3.3. Special function

The special function of address terms refers to the special meanings expressed by the

communicating parties in specific situations and psychology. In the actual language communication, because of the changing context and psychological feelings, the speaker will choose different address terms. This situation is reflected in the real communication. In the same language or at different times, the same person will be addressed differently. The alienation between people can be reflected by the change of address terms. The alienation between the two parties will also affect the choice and use of address terms. In turn, the proper choice of address terms will affect the relationship between the two sides, which can shorten the distance between the two sides, and also make the two sides more alienated.

#### 4. Chinese Culture in Address Terms

Language is the reflection of national culture. They are interactional and inseparable. The specific culture of different nationalities restricts the language development of different nationalities in a certain degree. Address term is a very important part of every language. It reflects not only the essence of the cultural background of language, but also fully reflects its profound connotation. Its formation and development are influenced by various cultural factors.

##### 4.1. Chinese culture in names

Name address is one of the most common address forms used by people. In Chinese, Name address usually consists of “surname”+ “given name”. Surname is in the first place and given name is in the second place. We often call people who are familiar and closely related by their given names, but when we address strangers, colleagues or persons of certain status, we should add surnames to show respect, otherwise we will be considered impolite or flattering. In Western culture, westerners advocate equality and there is no barrier between them. Even young people can directly address elderly people by their names.

Chinese people attach great importance to names, which is not only a symbol to distinguish persons. Family names represent the family system that they belong. They cannot be chosen or changed. No matter what happens, the blood of the family name can't be changed. And “given name” is a great significance. When people give a name to their children, they often give them with some special meanings through expressing their best wishes.

##### 4.2. Chinese culture in post and rank

Post and rank address refers to all professional and title address terms, such as “Yisheng (医生) — doctor, Hushi (护士) — nurse, Kuaiji (会计) — accountant” (professional address terms) and “Xiaozhang (校长) — principal, Jiao-

shou (教授) — professor, Juzhang (局长) — director” (title address terms). First, post and rank address embodies the concept of official standard culture. Influenced by thousands of years of feudal hierarchy, the concept of hierarchy has been deeply rooted in people's ideology and behavior. Even in modern society, the official-based concept is very serious and prominent in social relations communication. In Chinese address terms, “official position” or “title” will be highlighted, so that address terms can be linked with social power and position, and extended to the direction of position, title and occupation. Second, post and rank address embodies the cultural concept of respecting teachers. China has a cultural tradition of respecting teachers. When a teacher is called, he or she cannot be called directly by his or her full name. A member, who is a teacher, even if he or she is not in school, is often called as “Laoshi (老师) — teacher” and respected as a teacher. Third, post and rank address embodies the cultural concept of humiliating oneself and respecting others. Influenced by Confucian traditional culture, Chinese people have the habit of belittling, degrading their status and being self-modest. Expressing one's respect by elevating the other's position often gets the other's favor.

##### 4.3. Chinese culture in common social language

Social generic address forms can be used in the process of face-to-face communication for those who belong to different identities and positions, like Xiansheng (先生) — Mr., Nushi (女士) — Mrs. Because of its universal applicability, it can better reflect the cultural concept of the times and social situation.

Although modern Chinese society does not use honorific or self-humble terms as in ancient times, such values have been deeply engraved in people's ideas. In daily life, when communicating with others, people often encounter situations in which they do not know each other's name, age, identity and occupation. In this case, the speaker will elevate the other's status. For example, if you do not know how to address a person you encounter in school, you can use the title to address and try to elevate the status of him/her. Another example, when you meet older people in school, you will probably call them “Laoshi (老师) — teacher”, although they may be outsiders or family members of school staff.

#### 5. Study Design

##### 5.1. Study purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand the current usage of address terms by the contemporary Chinese college students to teachers, and to answer the following questions: how

do Chinese college students understand the importance of address terms in interpersonal communication; how do Chinese college students address teachers; what are the factors that influence Chinese college students' choice of teachers' address terms.

### 5.2. Data collection

The survey was conducted through a questionnaire network ([www.wenjuan.com](http://www.wenjuan.com)). The author investigates the undergraduate students of Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages, China. The students mainly come from six different colleges, including International Business College, Network Communication College, Oriental Languages College, Euro-Language College, Hospitality Administration College and Chinese Language and Culture College. A total of 1566 valid questionnaires were collected.

### 5.3. Questionnaire design

In this survey, the addressees refer to the teachers in the college. According to the relationship between the addressers and the addressees, the author lists three types of teachers in the college: intimate teachers, general teachers and teachers unknown. According to the social distance between teachers and students, the fourth category is set up as teachers holding administrative positions. Questions and options are as follows:

Q1: How do you usually address these teachers? (Multiple answers are available)

Q2: How do you usually address these teachers? (Please choose the most frequently used item.)

Q3: How do you feel about your use of address forms?

- a. very good
- b. average
- c. not good, often make mistakes and don't know how to address

Q4: Do you think the proper use of address forms will have an impact on your interpersonal communication?

- a. large impact
- b. some impact
- c. no impact
- d. I don't know

In order to facilitate the choice of the subjects and the statistics of the testers, the contents of address terms are given before the questionnaire questions, which basically covers the address forms that the subjects may choose as the choice items of Q1 and Q2 (see Table 1).

## 6. Findings and Discussions

### 6.1. College students' address forms to teachers are diverse

The first question in questionnaire is to investigate the address forms of college students to different teachers. Multiple answers are available to this question, in order to understand the diversity of address forms of college students to teachers. From Table 2, it can be seen that college students' address forms for teachers are diverse. Especially for teachers with close relationship, the diversity is more significant. In addition to 42.21% students choose "Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option A) and 39.21% students choose "surname + Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option B), students may choose other address forms. For general teachers, teachers unknown and teachers in administrative positions, maybe because of social distance and power status, students avoid to choose address forms intended for relatives or ridicule, like "Given name + Ge/Jie (哥/姐) — brother/sister" (option H), "Shuaige/Meinu (帅哥/美女) — handsome man/beauty" (option I), "Qin (亲) — dear" (option M). In Table 2, we can also see that 27.14% students may choose to use foreign language names to address intimate teachers. This may be related to the fact that our school is a foreign language school and more than 130 foreign teachers teaching different languages in our university. In addition, 2.94% students choose "zero address" (option N) for unknown teachers and 1.47% of the students may choose "zero address" (option N) for teachers in administrative positions. This may be because some students do not know how to properly address those teachers, and may also be influenced by their own personality.

**Table 1.** Address Terms for Teachers

A. Laoshi (老师), teacher	B. Family name + Laoshi (老师) — teacher	C. Given name + Laoshi (老师) — teacher	D. Name + Laoshi (老师) — teacher
E. Subject + Laoshi (老师) — teacher	F. Family name + position	G. Position	H. Given name + Ge/Jie (名 + 哥/姐) — brother/sister
I. Shuaige/Meinu (帅哥/美女) — handsome man/ beauty	J. Foreign language name	K. Mr./Miss/Ms + Family name	L. Name
M. Qin (亲) — dear	N. Zero address	O. Xiansheng (先生) — Mr.	P. Others

**Table 2.**How do you usually address these teachers? (Multiple answers)

Teachers	Address terms	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
Intimate teachers	n	541	366	46	0	97	0	0	105	36	128	11	82	13	23	0	118
	%	34.55	23.37	2.94	0	6.19	0	0	6.70	2.30	8.17	0.70	5.24	0.83	1.47	0	7.54
General teachers	n	788	541	25	23	117	0	0	13	0	11	13	35	0	0	0	0
	%	50.32	34.55	1.60	1.47	7.47	0	0	0.83	0	0.70	0.83	2.23	0	0	0	0
Teachers unknown	n	1225	165	0	14	34	0	35	0	11	0	11	48	0	11	0	12
	%	78.22	10.54	0	0.89	2.17	0	2.23	0	0.70	0	0.70	3.07	0	0.70	0	0.75
Teachers with administrative positions	n	930	341	11	25	35	70	93	0	0	0	0	24	0	0	0	37
	%	59.39	21.78	0.70	1.60	2.23	4.47	5.94	0	0	0	0	1.53	0	0	0	2.36

**6.2. College students will choose different address forms in different contexts.**

From the students' answers to the first question, it can be seen that students' address terms to teachers are diverse. Combining with individual interviews, it is further understood that students will choose different address forms in different contexts. When students and teachers are face-to-face, students will choose "Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option A) or "surname + Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option B) to express their recognition and respect for the identity of teachers, showing a clear gap in social status. When students and teachers communicate through online social tools such as QQ and Wechat which are really popular in China, they tend to choose address forms intended for relatives or ridicule, like "Given name + Ge/Jie (哥/姐) — brother/sister" (option H), "Shuaige/Meinu (帅哥/美女) — handsome man/beauty" (option I), "Qin (亲) — dear" (option M) to shorten the distance between each other, especially for teachers who are not particularly high in social rank and status or who usually get along well with students. When students mention or talk about a teacher with other students, because the teacher is not a direct listener, some students may choose a "name" or a code name to address the teacher.

**6.3. College students address teachers with tendentiousness.**

The second question is the same as the first one, but it is set as a single-choice question in order to know which address terms students prefer when facing different teachers. From Table 3, it can be seen that college students mainly call teachers as "Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option C) and "surname + Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option B), which shows that teachers still have power status, and Chinese college students inherit the virtues of respecting teachers and teaching. Students call teachers by professional titles, which show respect and courtesy to teachers. There are obviously more kinds of address terms for intimate teachers than for

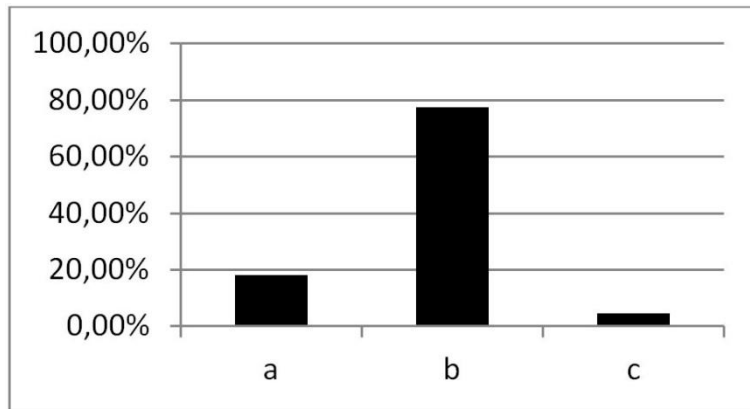
other three kinds of teachers. Especially for teachers in administrative positions, the choice of address terms obviously has the consideration of power status, which may be influenced by the remaining official-based ideology in feudal society. In Table 3, we can see that students choose to use "Given name + Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option C) for intimate teachers, but no one chooses "Full name + Laoshi (老师) — teacher" (option D), which shows the common ground of students in this cognition. Because in China "Given name" reflects more cordiality and closer distance. A small number of students tend to choose "Qin (亲) — dear", which shows that the network address terms has affected the campus address terms. Some students use "Shuaige/Meinv (帅哥/美女) — handsome man/ beauty" (option I) to express their desire to shorten the distance with teachers and to achieve equality. In addition, a small number of students choose to use "foreign language name" (option J) or "Mr. / Miss / Ms + surname" to address teachers, which reflects a major feature of foreign language universities, and the address forms tend to be westernized.

**6.4. Most students lack self-confidence in using address forms.**

As shown in Figure 1, less than 20% of the students think that they have a good command of the use of address terms, which shows that there are not so many students who can use address terms clearly and confidently. About 80% of the students think that their use of address terms is generally grasped. This may be because the concept of address terms is not very clear for most of the students, or they lack confidence in their use of address terms. At the same time, they may be influenced by traditional ideas and choose "general" by compromise. About 5% of the students think that they can't grasp the address terms properly and often make mistakes or don't know how to address. From this we can see that the students' use of address terms is either insufficient or unsatisfactory.

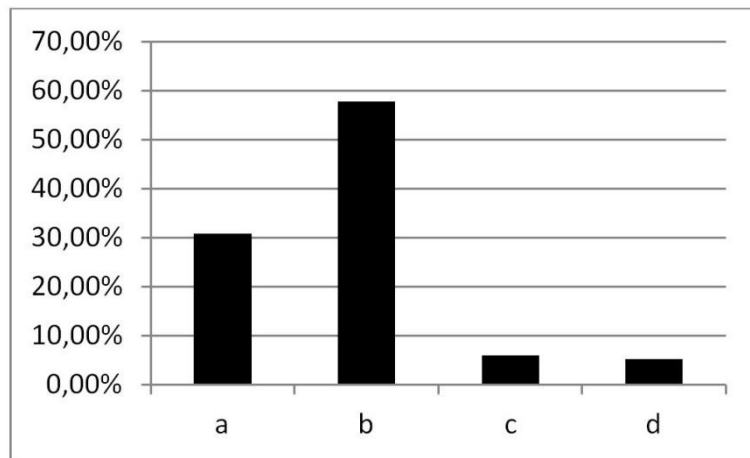
**Table 3.** How do you usually address these teachers? (Single choice)

Teachers	Address terms	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P
Intimate teachers	n	661	614	106	48	176	23	23	152	23	425	82	129	70	23	11	188
	%	42.21	39.21	6.77	3.07	11.24	1.47	1.47	9.71	1.47	27.14	5.24	8.24	4.47	1.47	0.70	12.01
General teachers	n	1013	636	35	82	247	58	23	0	0	72	94	36	0	0	0	0
	%	64.69	40.61	2.23	5.24	15.77	3.70	1.47	0	0	4.60	6.00	2.30	0	0	0	0
Teachers unknown	n	1330	188	0	13	35	11	70	0	0	25	0	47	0	46	0	48
	%	84.93	12.01	0	0.83	2.23	0.70	4.47	0	0	1.60	0	3.00	0	2.94	0	3.07
Teachers with administrative positions	n	954	542	35	58	23	94	176	14	0	12	0	25	0	23	0	0
	%	60.92	34.61	2.23	3.70	1.47	6.00	11.24	0.89	0	0.77	0	1.60	0	1.47	0	0



**Figure 1.** How do you feel about your use of address forms?

Note: a — very good, b — average, c — not good, often make mistakes and don't know how to address



**Figure 2.** Do you think the proper use of address forms will have an impact on your interpersonal communication?

Note: a — large impact; b — some impact; c — no impact; d — I don't know

**6.5. Proper use of address forms has a certain impact on the quality of interpersonal communication.**

According to Figure 2, about 30% of the students think that proper use of address forms is very important and will have a great impact on interpersonal communication; more than half of the students think that it will have a little impact, but the impact will not be great; a small number of people think that it will not have an impact on interpersonal communication, and a

few students do not know how to answer this question. From Figure 2, we can find that most students think that the proper use of address forms has a certain impact on the quality of interpersonal communication, so students will pay attention to the use of address terms.

**7. Conclusion**

From the questionnaire survey and data analysis, we have a better understanding of the use of college teachers' address terms by con-

temporary Chinese college students. The address terms are used by students to teachers who are close to each other have various characteristics, such as “Given name + Ge/Jie (哥/姐) — brother / sister”, popular name “Shuaige/Meinu (帅哥/美女) — handsome man / beauty” and “Qin (亲) — dear” on the Internet. For teachers in general relationships and teachers who do not know, students mostly use traditional appellations such as “Laoshi (老师) — teacher” or “surname + Laoshi (老师) — teacher”. For the teachers who hold administrative positions with power status, students may be influenced by the feudal official standard. Besides using professional titles, they also tend to choose such terms as “surname + position” or “position”. In addition, the survey found that some students choose to use “foreign language name” or “Mr. / Miss / Ms + surname” to address teachers, which reflects the characteristics of foreign language colleges, and the appellation tends to be westernized.

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## Анализ обращений современных студентов китайских колледжей к преподавателям

**АННОТАЦИЯ.** Язык — это зеркало общества. Обращения, а именно наиболее частотные устойчивые термины, используемые при общении, изучаются уже давно; они отражают изменения и развитие политики, экономики и культуры страны. С развитием информационных технологий и другими новыми веяниями времени условия коммуникации в обществе в Китае также постоянно меняются. В соответствии с тенденцией диверсификации современные китайские студенты находятся под сильным влиянием средств массовой информации. Большинство студентов составляют открытые и общительные люди. Они не столь жестко следуют правилам этикета в части употребления традиционных терминов адресации в межличностном общении. Данная статья основана на наблюдениях за студентами очной формы обучения Института иностранных языков Чжэцзян Юэсю (Китай). Использовались такие методы исследования, как анкетирование и статистический анализ. Цель статьи состоит в установлении того, как современные китайские студенты обращаются к преподавателям колледжа и насколько осведомлены в области использования традиционных обращений. Опрос показал, что большое влияние на выбор терминов адресации оказывают социальный статус собеседника и отношения в системе «учитель — ученик», а представления учащихся о важности использования традиционных средств адресации значительно варьируются.

**КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА:** обращения; речевой этикет; преподаватели; колледжи; китайские студенты; функции языка; речевые формулы.

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**ДЛЯ ЦИТИРОВАНИЯ:** Ван Цзяпин. Анализ обращений современных студентов китайских колледжей к преподавателям / Ван Цзяпин // Политическая лингвистика. — 2019. — № 4 (76). — С. 172-178. — DOI 10.26170/pl19-04-20.

This study is only a survey of undergraduate students in a Chinese university, which inevitably has its limitations. In addition, address terms are not static, but change with age, status, occasion and speaker's subjective consciousness, so we can try to study the dynamic of address forms in the future.

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