

## **Mandarin Self-Referential Expressions: A Sociolinguistic Study**

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Mandarin speakers may use expressions other than the first-person singular pronoun *wo* 'I' to refer to themselves. This study explores the social meaning of those expressions with surveys and interviews. Based on 1135 questionnaires from all age groups and 29 provinces in China, the quantitative analyses support the hypothesis that social variables statistically significantly correlate with the usage of self-referential expressions tested in this study (*benren* 'this person', *baobao* 'baby', *baba* 'dad', *renjia* 'that person', and *laozi* 'old man'). By interviewing 21 Mandarin speakers with various demographic backgrounds, social meanings of each expression are analyzed. This study contributes to the literature in that: it explores the relationship between social variables and self-referential usages by large-sample-size quantitative analysis; it incorporates Mandarin self-reference users' subjective interactional aims and comments into scholars' analysis; it studies some unconventional usages of Mandarin referential expressions not mentioned in the previous literature.

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Self-references**

Pronouns like *I* or *you* can be classified as deictics (Hanks 1992). Deixis plays a central role in the use and understanding of language (Hanks 1992). They can also be viewed as *shifters*, as the reference shifts in different speech situations (Silverstein 1976). Expressions other than pronouns can also serve as deictic expressions. In the field of philosophy, self-reference denotes a statement that refers to itself or its own referent, as in *this sentence is not true* (Bolander 2008). In this article, self-reference means what people call themselves.

In Chinese, there are various ways of referring to oneself. First-person singular pronouns such as *wu* and *yu* are self-references in Old Chinese, while *an* and *ou* are self-references in modern Chinese dialects (Xue and Zhang 2019). In modern Mandarin, the first-person singular pronoun *wo* is the canonical self-reference. There are also non-canonical usages of self-reference such as *nainai* 'grandma' in (1)<sup>1</sup>. This study focuses on the lexical variants that function as self-references in modern Mandarin.

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<sup>1</sup> This example is from Xue and Zhang 2019.

(1) 来，小朋友，奶奶带你买好吃的去！

Lai, xiaopengyou, nainai dai ni mai haochi de qu!

Come here, kiddo. Grandma will take you to buy something tasty!

## 1.2 Previous Research on Mandarin Self-referential Expressions

Previously, scholars (Zhang 1993, Xiao & Shen 2004, Chen 2009) have summarized the forms, categorizations, and pragmatic contexts of Mandarin self-references. Scholars categorized self-referential expressions in distinctive ways, but certain categories such as kinship terms, occupation terms, or pronouns are generally discernable. For instance, *baba* ‘dad’ and *laozi* ‘old man’ belong to the category of kinship referral pronoun, while *renjia* ‘that person’ can be used as a third-person referral pronoun. Zhang (2002) claimed that social identity could be related to self-reference by commenting that “In martial arts fictions, Chinese knights usually call themselves ‘I+ nickname’, and this phenomenon may correlate with some personality traits of the characters. In some novels, the particular kind of self-reference becomes the tag and even part of the identity of the person [author’s translation].”

Researchers have paid attention to the categorization of self-referential expressions and summarized their different communicative purposes. They have analyzed self-reference on a macro level, ignoring the impact of social factors on speakers’ choice and frequency of self-referential expressions. Liu (2015) accurately pointed out the lack of quantitative analysis and the absence of sociolinguistic perspective. Another limitation of previous research is that little attention has been given to speakers’ subjective purposes of using self-references. It is unclear whether the communicative purposes suggested by scholars reflect the opinions of the expressive subjects themselves. Previous speculations about the social meaning of self-references have not been supported by empirical evidence.

## 2. The Present Study

The purpose of this study is to advance the understanding of Mandarin self-reference by viewing it from a sociolinguistic perspective and by conducting both quantitative and qualitative analysis, which is unprecedented in the literature. An online survey is conducted to collect data for quantitative analyses. The study also compares interviewees’ responses and scholars’ interpretations on why or why not a certain expression is used. This compensates for the limitations of previous studies that only theoretically deduced the intentions of expressive subjects from a third-person perspective and that why a term is not used has been underexplored.

The dependent variable in question is the function of self-reference in Mandarin. The five lexical variants of the variable explored in the study are *benren* ‘this person’, *baobao* ‘baby’, *baba* ‘dad’, *renjia* ‘that person’, and *laozi* ‘old man’. These five expressions are chosen in this study because they could represent different categories. They are chosen also for their potential in sociolinguistic variation. These reasons will be discussed below from section 2.1 to section 2.5.

## 2.1 This Person *Benren*

*Benren* ‘this person’ is a first-person referral pronoun as in (2). It can also be translated as ‘I myself’ in English<sup>2</sup>. When used as self-reference, *benren* ‘this person’ contains humor (Xu 1992). Compared with *wo* ‘I’, it is more subjective and is usually used in formal occasions (Yao 2008). Furthermore, *benren* ‘this person’ is often used in legal documents. Though its usage has expanded to daily conversation, it is worthwhile to know whether the industry the person works in correlates with the frequency of referring to oneself with *benren* ‘this person’.

(2) 本人对外面的待遇不是很了解。

*Benren dui waimian de daiyu bushi hen liaojie.*

This person does not know much about the salary of other companies.

## 2.2 Baby *Baobao*

*Baobao* ‘baby’ belongs to the category of nickname referral pronouns (Liu 2015), and it has been utilized as an increasingly popular term in Chinese. It is conventionally used by preschoolers or other non-adults. However, currently some adults also use *baobao* ‘baby’ to refer to themselves. Scholars (Zhao 2016, Hu 2016) claimed that it is used by an adult to create a childlike image and to narrow the distance between the interlocutors. It can be used to indicate various emotions or purposes including affection, aloofness, relaxation, and a demand for attention or protection (Xiao 2016).

*Baobao* ‘baby’ has drawn scholarly attention since it was listed as one of the top ten online buzzwords in 2015 by the National Center for Language Resources in China. There is no agreement on how this buzzword has gained popularity; however, it is widely acknowledged that this self-referential expression is so productive that people can use it in various circumstances. Example (3) is one of the most popular usages of the expression, and it is believed by Qin (2016) to be the origin of this buzzword.

(3) 吓死宝宝了!

*Xiasi baobao le!*

It scared baby to death!

Some scholars have speculated about which speakers are more likely to call themselves *baobao* ‘baby’. Feng and Li (2016) believed that people of any age or gender refer to themselves with it, though it had been used by young people, mostly female speakers, before this current popularity. Zhang (2016) believed that using *baobao* ‘baby’

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<sup>2</sup> *Benren* is translated as ‘this person’, while *renjia* is translated as ‘that person’ in this paper. These two English translations have ‘person’ in common, which could suggest that there is the same relationship between the two Chinese expressions. However, it is not true. The two English expressions are close but not “perfect” translations.

is common among young female adults but not male speakers. Similarly, Zhao (2016) argued that female speakers can use it in many situations. Wan and Li (2016) argued that *baobao* ‘baby’ is widespread as a self-reference among young people, though it is used in all age groups. It is agreed that to some extent, young female adults may be more likely to refer to themselves with *baobao* ‘baby’ than other people. Therefore, special attention should be paid to see whether using *baobao* ‘baby’ as self-reference is correlated with age and gender.

### 2.3 Dad *Baba*

One kinship referral pronoun is *baba* ‘dad or daddy’ (Liu 2015). As a self-reference, it can be used by a father when talking to his children as in (4).

(4) 来, 爸爸给你讲个故事。

Lai, baba gei ni jiang ge gushi.

Come here, let dad tell you a story.

Interestingly, it is observed that both male and female speakers can also refer to themselves by *baba* ‘dad’ when talking with peers as in (5)<sup>3</sup>. Little scholarly attention has been paid to this novel usage. This unconventional usage and its difference from the conventional usage are examined in this study. In the survey, respondents who indicated that they refer to themselves with *baba* ‘dad’ had an additional question about to which interlocutor they refer to themselves with *baba* ‘dad’. Based on observations, it is hypothesized that young people are more likely to turn to this novel use and that male speakers are more likely to use *baba* ‘dad’ conventionally than female speakers.

(5) 爸爸要去吃饭了, 儿子要不要一起来?

Baba yao qu chifan le, erzi yaobuyao yiqilai?

Daddy is going to have lunch. Will my son have lunch with me or not?

### 2.4 That Person *Renjia*

*Renjia* ‘that person’ can be used as a third-person referral pronoun as in (6) (Lao 1982). In addition to its use as a self-reference, *renjia* ‘that person’ can also be used as a second- or third-person singular pronoun. Its first-person singular pronominal usage evolves from the third-person one (Wan 2006). Scholars (Wang 2016, Wan 2006) believed that speakers use the expression as self-reference in order to change perspective: the speaker adopts the perspective of the listeners, so that a third-person pronoun is used to refer to oneself.

(6) 你说话呀! 成心逗人家的火是怎么着?

<sup>3</sup> This is an example provided by an interviewee.

Ni shuohua ya! Chengxin dou renjia de huo shi zenmezhao?  
 Say something! Why must you always try to make that person mad?

It is hypothesized that women are more likely to use *renjia* ‘that person’ based on previous literature. Liu (2015) claimed that *renjia* ‘that person’ is commonly used by women. Zhai (2004) assumed that *renjia* ‘that person’ is a euphemistic first-person singular pronoun that occurs in dialogues of people with close relationships and that its users are mostly young female adults. Other scholars (Wan 2006, Cao 2018) also believed it is mostly used by women. Cao (2018) claimed that women tend to centralize the status of male speakers, and they desire to express unsatisfactory and other emotions euphemistically. To sum up, the hypothesis is that age and gender are correlated with the frequency of using *renjia* ‘that person’ as self-reference.

### 2.5 Old Man *Laozi*

*Laozi* ‘old man’ can be seen as a kinship referral pronoun because it has a meaning similar to *baba* ‘dad’. It can also be categorized as a communicative referral pronoun, and some people use *laozi* ‘old man’ to sound more powerful (Liu 2015). *Laozi* ‘old man’ is typically considered as a vulgar expression. (7) is an utterance by a guard of a gate, a job of relatively low social status. It is hypothesized that people with lower income, less education, and lower social status would be more likely to refer to themselves with *laozi* ‘old man’.

(7) 郑大人有郑大人的事，你们别找他瞎嚷嚷！

Zheng daren you zheng daren de shi, nimen bie zhao ta xia rangrang!  
 Captain Zheng has his own business. You shouldn’t go to bother him!

这东门的事，是老子负责！

zhe dongmen de shi, shi laozi fuzu!  
 Issues of the East Gate are the old man’s responsibilities!

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 The Quantitative Study

Following Kiesling (2004), who conducted self-report survey, I distributed anonymous online surveys that were created by Wenjuanxing in Mandarin Chinese. They were forwarded and shared through Wechat, Wechat groups, and QQ groups. Altogether 1171 survey responses were collected. The respondents were asked to select the answer choices most closely described their identities and their habits of using each self-referential expression. On the survey, respondents need to choose whether they *always*, *sometimes*, or *never* use each lexical variant of self-reference in question. There is a follow-up question about the circumstances of using *baba* ‘dad’ as self-reference to explore its unconventional

usage. There is one question for each social independent variable, and the reason for adopting each social independent variable will be discussed in section 3.1.1.

### 3.1.1 Independent Variables and Hypotheses

The social independent variables in question are gender, sexual orientation, age, geographical area, educational background, industry, income, and occupation. The independent variables of gender, age, educational background, and social status could be motivated by the previous analysis of the five expressions. The variables of gender and age are motivated by *baobao* ‘baby’, while the variables of educational background and social status are motivated by *laozi* ‘old man’. Taking the context of Chinese society into account, the variables of occupation, industry, and income were used to estimate social status. *Baba* ‘dad’ and *laozi* ‘old man’ are conventionally masculine self-references, but they have been observed to be used by females. Zimman (2017) argued that gender should be understood as elements of sociolinguistic style and it is complex. The independent variable of sexual orientation is used to try to decode the expression of gender. Online platforms allowed me to access questionnaires from all over China, and geographical area has been identified as a major determinant in sociolinguistic variations. Therefore, the independent variable of geographical area is identified.

To answer the question of whether Mandarin self-references are socially related, it is hypothesized that for each self-referential expression in question, there is a significant difference in usage among the demographic groups classified by each criterion. Specifically, the frequencies and/or usages of expressions exhibit discrepancy for people of different regions, genders, occupations, sexual orientations, and industry groups. Furthermore, as an individual’s age, education, and income increase, the frequencies of using several self-referential expressions either consistently increase or consistently decrease. To test previous claims and to explore the specific social meanings of each expression in question, other hypotheses, which are those observed or claimed relationships between using a self-referential expression and a social variable, are also evaluated.

### 3.1.2 Statistical Analysis

The 1171 questionnaires collected had undergone a screening process that excludes contradictory and inconsistent responses from further investigation<sup>4</sup>. Altogether there are 1135 effective questionnaires from all age groups and 29 out of 34 provinces in China. There are 525 respondents who declared themselves as male, and there are 610 people who reported that they are females.

The survey data are analyzed qualitatively and then quantitatively. The aggregated data frame for each possible correlation is visualized as a graph with the frequency of self-referential expressions at the y-axis and demographic categories at the x-axis. For correlations regarding categorical social variables (i.e., region, gender, occupation, and

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<sup>4</sup> The criteria to consider a questionnaire invalid include choosing *housewife* and *male* at the same time and selecting both *below 18* and *Doctor’s degree*.

sexual orientation), if there is an observed frequency discrepancy, I further use the chi-squared test to decide whether the difference is of statistical significance. As for other combinations concerning age, educational background, and income, if the visualized graph does not exhibit consistent patterns, it is concluded that there is no correlation between the social factor in question and the usage of this self-reference. If the graph shows that the frequency of using a term consistently increase or decrease from left to right, the chi-squared test is employed to determine whether the observed correlation is of statistical significance.

### 3.2 Sociolinguistic Interviews

Interviews are conducted to elicit speakers' opinions or linguistic ideologies on using self-reference. Interviews are essential in knowing why some speakers do not use some expressions, an issue that has not been discussed in previous literature. Twenty-one people from different demographic backgrounds were interviewed in this study. Nine interviewees were male and twelve were female. People who are in their early adulthood, middle-aged individuals, and people in their fifties or sixties were interviewed in this study. The highest level of education the interviewees received ranged from secondary school diploma to doctoral degree. Some interviewees were unknown to the researcher before the interview. Other interviewees were friends or family members of the researcher, so the effect of the observer's paradox could be reduced.

Interviews may start with self-introduction, if necessary, followed by questions about opinions on using self-references other than *wo* 'I' in general and on specific lexical items in this study. Interview questions included the following. Do you use *benren* 'this person' to refer to yourself? When or with whom do you call yourself *benren* 'this person'? Could you give me an example? Why do you use or not use this term? Who do you think would use this term to refer to themselves? What do you think of those people who refer to themselves with *benren* 'this person'? Similar questions were asked about each term for each interviewee.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 General Descriptions

The descriptive and analytical statistics results of the study are demonstrated in Table 1. Each cell in this table represents a combination of one social independent variable and one self-referential expression. The grey cells without numbers are the combinations that have no observed correlation, while the grey cells with numbers are the observed correlations without statistical significance ( $p > .05$  or  $p = .05$ ). All the white cells indicate statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ) correlations between the demographic features and self-referential expressions. 73% of all the combinations of self-referential usages and social variables have confirmed to be statistically significant correlations. The study has found that for each social variable, there is at least one expression that is statistically relevant.

Furthermore, all the self-referential expressions are connected with more than four out of eight tested social variables.

Table 1. Descriptive and Analytical Statistics Results of Chi-squared Test

Expressions Social variable	<i>Benren</i> 'This Person'	<i>Baobao</i> 'Baby'	<i>Renjia</i> 'That person'	<i>Baba</i> 'Dad'	Non- Kinship <i>Baba</i>	<i>Laozi</i> 'Old Man'
Age		P<0.001			P<0.001	P<0.001
Region	0.007	P<0.001	0.170	0.315	0.762	P<0.001
Gender	0.005	P<0.001	0.003	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001
Occupation	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001	P<0.001
Sexual Orientation	0.028	0.014	P<0.001	P<0.001	0.012	P<0.001
Industry	P<0.001	P<0.001	0.001	P<0.001	0.152	P<0.001
Education				0.158	0.018	0.152
Income	P<0.001		0.035	P<0.001	P<0.001	0.002

As indicated in the table, the social factor of gender, sexual orientation, and occupation are related to the frequency of referring to oneself by all the five Mandarin expressions in question. Other social variables-- namely age, geographical area, industry, and income-- also correspond to most self-references. These support the general hypothesis that Mandarin self-references are socially-related.

#### 4.2 This Person *Benren*: Objectively Formal and Subjectively Humorous

The hypothesis that *benren* 'this person' is correlated with industry is confirmed. Among the 102 respondents who work in law firms, accounting firms, or other consulting companies, 75 (74%) of them sometimes or always use this self-referential expression. Some interviews confirmed the observations of researchers. The response of one interviewee confirmed the claim of Yao (2008) that *benren* 'this person' is used in formal or official occasions. This respondent further elaborated on this viewpoint by saying that he uses it to keep the distance between unfamiliar audiences and himself. He pointed out that he uses *benren* 'this person' to show modesty as in (8). Another respondent's claim that *benren* 'this person' is adopted to joke with friends confirms the observation of Xu (1992) that the expression contains humor. Another interviewee asserted that because *benren* 'this person' is a formal expression, using it as self-reference makes the everyday conversation interesting.

(8) 本人没那么强的能力，本人讲得不好。

*Benren* mei name qiang de nengli, *benren* jiangde buhao.

This person's ability isn't that strong. This person did not lecture that well.



Not all observations of scholars have been supported by subjective communicative purposes of the interviewees. One respondent said that sometimes, instead of using *wo* ‘I’, a subjective term, to refer to himself, he would use *benren* ‘this person’ because there is no bias and it sounds objective. This comment is in line with the previously referenced response that *benren* ‘this person’ is employed to create distance. However, this comment directly contradicts the statement by Yao (2008) that *benren* ‘this person’ is subjective. This contradiction indicates that the speculative analysis of researchers is not sufficient.

During the interviews, some people claimed that *benren* ‘this person’ is too formal to be used in spoken language. Some people would never use *benren* ‘this person’ as self-reference because they think the expression “sounds self-centered,” “egoistic,” or “weird.” One respondent claimed that people in her mother’s generation use *benren* ‘this person’, and thus she does not use it.

#### 4.3 Baby *Baobao*: Sentimentality of Young Female Adults

The statistical analysis verified some scholars’ speculation that young people and female speakers are more likely to use *baobao* ‘baby’. For adult speakers, the frequency of using *baobao* ‘baby’ as self-reference decreases with age, which suggests that even though it is an expression occurring in the idiolects of Chinese people from all age groups, it is still more prevalent among young adults. In addition, the study shows that significantly more female speakers use *baobao* ‘baby’ as self-reference.

Some comments made by the interviewees confirmed the assertions of scholars. A speaker claimed that he uses the expression to look cute when talking with close friends. One respondent described that when she is disappointed, she says (9) to talk to her close friends in jest. (9) can be viewed as an attention-seeking purpose as proposed by previous scholars.

(9) 宝宝比较心塞。

Baobao bijiao xinsai.

Baby is upset.

Some interviewees commented that they have never used *baobao* ‘baby’ since they think they are not the kind of person who would behave like a spoiled naïve child. Another respondent stated that she does not use the self-referential expression because it is too young for her. Another comment is that the expression is too sentimental and emotional, and thus does not fit the personality of the speaker. The female speaker who made this comment further described that she may use *baobao* ‘baby’ as self-reference to joke on rare occasions. Those comments support the claim of Xiao (2016) that people use *baobao* ‘baby’ to indicate emotion and to demand attention or protection. Other respondents do not use *baobao* ‘baby’ as self-reference because they think it is “of poor taste” or “lowly.”

#### 4.4 Dad *Baba*: Kinship and Non-Kinship Self-reference

The conventional and unconventional usages of *baba* ‘dad’ exhibit different correlations with age. While people’s usage of *baba* ‘dad’ when talking with children increases with age, referring to oneself as *baba* ‘dad’ when having conversations with peers decreases with age. In other words, young people are more likely to use the kinship expression unconventionally, which confirms the observation mentioned before.

Among the interviewees who have children, some would use *baba* ‘dad’ as self-reference when talking with children while some would not. One respondent believed that children should be treated equally, and therefore, *baba* ‘dad’ is not used in the family as self-reference because it indicates inequality. This comment suggested that similar to *laozi* ‘old man’, *baba* ‘dad’ is correlated with power.

Several young female and male adults gave reasons for why they use *baba* ‘dad’ to refer to themselves when talking amongst peers. Two female speakers in their early twenties pointed out that using the expression makes them look tougher and more powerful. Both of them use it when talking to female and male peers. One of them uses the expression more often when talking to male than female friends because she thinks that male speakers adopt this unconventional usage of kinship term as a joke between each other more often. She suggested that, based on her experience, the usage is usually reciprocal. The other female speaker believed that she uses it more often in conversations via the social media application Wechat than in regular face-to-face talk. A male speaker who uses the kinship term unconventionally explained that he uses it when talking to close friends. He said that it is an expression that can narrow the distance between speakers and he believes that his peers use the term also for this reason.

Many interviewees were aware of the unconventional usage of *baba* ‘dad’, even though some of them do not use it themselves. One interviewee who has children stated her confusion about the novel usage. Most young adults, regardless of whether they use it or not, claimed that they think people who are using *baba* ‘dad’ among peers are joking. Young interviewees with peers who use the term respond differently. One interviewee adopts this unconventional usage occasionally because she thinks it is popular among peers. There is a young male adult who does not use the term and maintained that people who use *baba* ‘dad’ as a self-reference among peers are crossing the line. He believed that he is a gentle person who knows the proper boundaries. He also explained that in order to be polite, he does respond to others who use this term when talking to him.

#### 4.5 That Person *Renjia*: Seeking a Sweet Perspective

The finding that *renjia* ‘that person’ is irrelevant to age contradicts some speculations of scholars. However, the result that significantly more female speakers use *renjia* ‘that person’ as self-reference confirms the proposition that this expression is associated with gender. Many interviewees also expressed their impression that *renjia* ‘that person’ is associated with the female gender.

People use this self-reference for various reasons. Some examples provided by interviewees support the view of Cao (2018) that *renjia* ‘that person’ is used to express dissatisfaction and other emotions euphemistically. One interviewee stated that she uses *renjia* ‘that person’ when talking to family members or close friends. For instance, she may use it when talking to her husband in order to *sajiao* ‘act like a spoiled child’. An unmarried female in her early twenties also commented that she uses it to *sajiao*. She said, “I am a girl, and it is normal to use it.” A middle-aged female interviewee said that she uses the expression when she is arguing with others as in (10). A male interviewee in his sixties claimed that he uses *renjia* ‘that person’ as self-reference in informal situations such as at home and that he uses it when talking to family members or friends. Another male interviewee in his fifties mentioned that he uses the expression when he feels that he has been misunderstood. He uses it when talking to his wife as in (11).

(10) 你光考虑你自己了，你怎么不考虑考虑人家啊？

Ni guangkaolv ni ziji le, ni zenme bu kaolvkaolv renjia a?

You only think of yourself, but why don't you consider that person?

人家也有不高兴的时候啊。

Renjia ye you bu gaoxing de shihou a.

That person also has unhappy moments.

(11) 人家都说了不吃了，你干嘛还要给我盛啊？

Renjia dou shuole buchi le, ni ganma haiyao geiwo cheng a?

That person has already said that he doesn't want anymore, so why do you still offer me more to eat?

One interactional aim brought up by an interviewee but not mentioned in previous literature is that *renjia* ‘that person’ can be used to express personal opinions objectively. The interviewee uses it to express her opinion in a way that the listener can understand the situation and idea without noticing that it is her opinion.

Mandarin speakers who never use *renjia* ‘that person’ provided several reasons. Interviewees indicated that s/he does not use *renjia* ‘that person’ to call herself or himself because s/he is conventional or straightforward. Other interviewees stated that young girls are associated with *renjia* ‘that person’ and that since s/he is not in that age or gender group, s/he does not use it. One female speaker in her early twenties claimed that she does not use *renjia* ‘that person’ as self-reference because she thinks it is too affectedly sweet.

#### 4.6 Old Man *Laozi*: Rough, but Powerful

The stereotypically vulgar expression *laozi* ‘old man’ is not correlated to educational background, which is somewhat different from the previous prediction. The frequency of using *laozi* ‘old man’ decreases with the advancement of degree levels, but

chi-squared test shows that it is not a statistically significant correlation. The frequency of referring to oneself with *laozi* ‘old man’ decreases with age and increases with income. The result shows that it is likely that some people use it, even though their identity contradicts the stereotypical association of the self-referential expression.

Even though *baba* ‘dad’ and *laozi* ‘old man’ could both mean *dad*, some people do not use them interchangeably as self-reference. The young female speaker who calls herself *baba* ‘dad’ to joke does not use the term *laozi* ‘old man’ because it is “too serious to be used for teasing or joking.” She claimed that it crosses the line and it is not as mild and acceptable as *baba* ‘dad’. She thinks it is weird that others call themselves *laozi* ‘old man’. Similarly, another young female adult held that even though she sometimes calls herself *baba* ‘dad’, she never calls herself *laozi* ‘old man’ because she thinks the latter is too masculine.

Some people declared that they use *laozi* ‘old man’ as self-reference. A young female adult who calls herself *baba* ‘dad’ also uses *laozi* ‘old man’ as self-reference. She commented that she used *laozi* ‘old man’ more often in the past and now she always uses the self-reference *baba* ‘dad’. She said that to her *laozi* ‘old man’ and *baba* ‘dad’ are interchangeable, despite her change of habit. A young male adult claimed that he uses *laozi* ‘old man’ when he is outraged or when he is quarreling with others. A middle-aged male speaker claimed that he uses *laozi* ‘old man’ as self-reference at home or with people he is familiar with in casual occasions. He said that it is normal for him to call himself *laozi* ‘old man’ because he is the head of the family. He is a white-collar worker and is not of low income.

During interviews, most interviewees verified the negative connotation of the expression. Most of them claimed that they do not use it because it is impolite, rude, disrespectful, vulgar, or insulting. A female speaker explained that it is an expression used by male speakers, and since she is aware of the boundary of gender, *laozi* ‘old man’ is not in her idiolect. One female speaker claimed that she does not have the occasion to use it as self-reference. A father claimed that he does not use *laozi* ‘old man’ in his conversations with his son, since he thinks that it is only used in fierce occasions and that his conversations are not fierce.

### 5. Using or Not Using Self-References

The interviews provide insights into understanding Mandarin self-reference. Some people claimed that they do not use any self-referential expressions other than *wo* ‘I’ at all, while there are people who use one term or several terms according to their specific communicative purposes. This section summarizes interview results generally.

There are several common reasons for not using a given self-referential expression. Some interviewees claimed that they do not use certain self-referential expressions not because of any negative opinions toward the expression but because they simply do not have the habit or the personality to say it. People who do not use a term for these reasons usually do not judge others who use the term.

Other people do not use an expression for the reason that they think the expression has a negative connotation. They claimed that using the expression as a self-reference is weird. Speakers assume that there is a certain connotation associated with calling oneself by this expression and that they do not use it because they do not want to have that personality association. It is worth noting that this assumed linkage with the expression sometimes is the exact reason why some people use the expression as self-reference. For instance, some people use *baobao* ‘baby’ for its connotation of young age, and some people do not use it because they think it is too childish.

Another reason for not using a particular self-referential expression is the lack of an appropriate situation or interlocutor. For instance, some speakers may think it is a written expression that is too formal to be spoken in daily conversations. In general, people do not use a certain self-reference because of their personality, their perception of the term, or because of the lack of the appropriate situation.

## 6. Discussion

This study contributes to our understanding of self-reference and confirms the general hypothesis that Mandarin Chinese speakers’ self-referential habits correlate with their social backgrounds. Using the five expressions as self-reference is an expansion of the semantic meaning and pragmatic usages of them. In general, whether and to what degree an individual accepts the expansion varies according to the demographic background of the Mandarin speaker. Specifically, the research sheds new light on the five Mandarin self-referential expressions *benren* ‘this person’, *baobao* ‘baby’, *baba* ‘dad’, *renjia* ‘that person’, and *laozi* ‘old man’. The five expressions in this study are more or less stereotypes, since there existed metalinguistic commentary. Note that speakers tend to have their own specific interpretation of the stereotypical meaning. The meanings of variants are not precise or fixed but they constitute an indexical field which is fluid (Eckert 2008). One understudied self-referential topic explored in this research is the unconventional usage of *baba* ‘dad’ and *laozi* ‘old man’. The novel usage challenges, exploits, and expands the dictionary-defined semantic domain that contains masculine and parent, in order to fulfill various functions such as teasing or sounding powerful.

Regarding the research method, this study extends the scope of self-referential studies to a testable level and discovers that some speaking habits are relevant to objective external factors as well as subjective internal considerations. Previous explorations of self-reference, for instance, the ones on communicative purposes, are by and large context-specific analyses. Generalizations have been made about the reasons certain self-referential expressions exist and when those expressions are used. This research has ventured beyond speculative analysis by combining the methods of quantitative analysis and interviews. It not only verifies or denies some speculative conclusions with statistical evidence, but also offers novel perspectives for understanding the phenomenon. The contradiction between speculation and empirical evidence suggests that referential studies should not be limited to speculative analysis.

In languages other than Chinese, people may refer to themselves by using expressions other than the canonical first-person singular pronoun. A study on English self-references has suggested the possible correlation between social identity and referring to oneself. Based on speeches by Abraham Lincoln, Field (2011) has found that Lincoln preferred to refer to himself with “we” instead of “I.” Field (2011) indicated that this kind of preference is relevant to Lincoln’s status of leadership, which implies that self-reference may relate to social status or representation of collectivity in English. In the present study, young female speakers use the masculine expressions *baba* ‘dad’ and *laozi* ‘old man’ to refer to themselves in order to sound powerful. Similarly, *dude*, an address term mostly used by men to address another man in English, has pragmatically expanded to be used by and to women (Kiesling 2004). Women adopting linguistic usages symbolizing masculinity could indicate women’s hope of gaining power cross-culturally. It would be interesting to view self-reference from a typological point of view. A cross-linguistic analysis of self-reference may provide insights on human cognition, psychology, culture, and society.

Using self-report survey and interviews are efficient and practical ways given the available resources of this study. However, on surveys, respondents sometimes may provide answers that they regard as socially acceptable and deny using forms that are associated with lower social status or with other negative perceptions. Interviewees might not admit that they use some self-reference because they feel there is a negative connotation, even though they provided information on linguistic behavior and linguistic ideology. Observations of actual language use are necessary to compensate for the limitation of self-report data. These observations could also provide insights about gender identity and role in Chinese society. Moreover, using *baba* ‘dad’ and *laozi* ‘old man’ among peers can be analyzed within the paradigm of peer socialization. With more evidence from observation, it could be argued that in a peer group, a group member who calls himself or herself by those expressions is more likely to be the peer member of “higher social status.” Also, besides analyzing Mandarin self-reference synchronically, it would be interesting to explore the longitudinal variation of using a given self-reference in the idiolect of a person.

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