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## Research Paper

# "Long Live Chairman Mao!!!! Your People Miss You!!!!": Development of the Involvement System to Describe Social Positioning in Digitally Mediated Communication From China

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## Abstract

This study reports on the development of the interpersonal discourse semantic system of involvement based on the analysis of evaluative meanings in 3 different data sets of Chinese digitally mediated communication. It builds on prior work developed within tenor and interpersonal meanings. Within the proposed system, 3 kinds of interpersonal meaning dimensions are posited. The first relates to the relative status between interlocutors and participants within a social hierarchy and is, thus, named social hierarchy. The second relates to the positioning of the person posting and others in relation to how close their relationship is and is, thus, named social distance. The third relates to who is being positioned within the other 2 dimensions and is called involvement type. Within the 3 data sets of digitally mediated Chinese communication (i.e., forum posts, SMS, and chat room messages), we found that the Chinese interlocutors frequently positioned themselves and others in relationships both within a social hierarchy as well as in relationships concerning their relative social distance. Results show there are a number of linguistic realisations of these 3 involvement systems which Chinese interlocutors use to negotiate their relative social positions in digitally mediated communication.

**Keywords:** Involvement; Appraisal; Interpersonal Meaning; Discourse Semantics; Affiliation

## 1. Introduction

People position themselves in relation to each other in different ways in their online discourse practice as part of the processes of affiliation (Zappavigna, 2011 & 2014). In some languacultures (Risager, 2005), like Chinese, the discursive positioning is more pronounced or overt, particularly when the social hierarchy is critically important for maintaining social relations. Within the interpersonal discourse semantic systems of systemic functional linguistics (SFL), involvement is posited as one of the systems that deals with this kind of positioning, however involvement systems are, to date, underdeveloped for use in SFL discourse analysis (Martin 2004; Martin and White 2005). Whereas Martin and White (2005, p. 34) recognise the importance of considering the implications of the vertical tenor relation of power (status) on affiliation, its realisation at the stratum of discourse semantics, where involvement is posited, is particularly underdeveloped. This study, thus, proposes a preliminary network for the interpersonal discourse semantic system of involvement, developed from earlier work introduced by Poynton (1990) and Martin (2004). The current work arises from a project that sought to analyse the evaluative meanings in Chinese 'digitally mediated communication' (Crystal, 2010, p. 235, as in Zappavigna & Martin, 2018, p. 6) using the more widely taken up discourse semantic system of appraisal (see Li & Dreyfus, forthcoming), however, it seemed that appraisal could not capture nor account for certain recurring patterns of interpersonal meanings we found in this data set, which at first we often coded with reservation within certain subsystems of appraisal including normality and propriety. Specifically, we found that the Chinese digitally mediated communication was highly sensitive to relative differences in the two abovementioned dimensions of social positioning:



the first relating to the relative social status between interlocutors or between the interlocutor and the participant(s) represented or referred to in any given post. This dimension is, thus, named social hierarchy (corresponding to ‘status’ in Don, 2019, Martin, 1992, and Poynton, 1985; ‘power’ in Poynton, 1990). The second dimension relates to the positioning of the poster and others in relation to social distance (corresponding to ‘contact’ in Don, 2017, Martin, 1992, and Poynton, 1985). In other words, within their posts, forum posters frequently positioned themselves and others in relationships within a social hierarchy as well as in relationships concerning their relative social distance. These strategies seem to function to complement the affiliation (broadly corresponding to both ‘alignment’ and ‘affiliation’ in Don, 2017 and ‘alignment’ in White, 2020) and bonding that occurs with the deployment of appraisal resources. In order to be able to systematically account for these different interpersonal meanings, we worked to reconceptualise the system of involvement, which, as previously mentioned, we argue, is an underdeveloped system in discourse semantics.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Relevance of Chinese Language and Culture to These Interpersonal Systems

The high sensitivity to relative differences in social distance and especially in social hierarchy among Chinese people can be attributed to the long-lasting influence of Confucianism, which has been the yardstick for behavioural appropriateness in China for millennia (Yao, 2000), and which is considered by some scholars as essentially a system of ethics (Yao, 2000). Whereas Buddhism, another major religion in China, centres on the equality of sentient beings, Confucianism emphasizes relationships that are simultaneously hierarchical and reciprocal. In proposing a number of cardinal human relationships, such as those between a lord and their subjects, or between a parent and child, Confucianism maintains that a noble person (*jūn zǐ* 君子) should aspire to act appropriately in accordance with their relative social role. For instance, as a child’s position in the social hierarchy is lower in relation to their parents, they are expected to be obedient and respectful to realise the virtue of filial piety (*xiào* 孝); however, the parent is also bound by an obligation to be nurturing and to act as a moral guide, a deviation from which would result in negative social sanction. It should also be mentioned that Chinese society has evolved so that certain highly hierarchical relationships no longer exist in their archetypal forms, such as between lord and subject, and some relationships today appear to be more horizontal than they once were, such as between husband and wife. In addition, whereas the Chinese people are bound by high Confucian moral standards in all relationships, close social distance may allow for the violation of norms as deemed appropriate by the social hierarchy, especially in the contemporary society. For example, siblings may tease or even insult each other as an expression of their close relationship. We argue here that social distance and social hierarchy work together in the negotiation of social positions.

### 2.2. Theoretical Orientation: From Tenor to Involvement

Important for the current work is the concept of affiliation (Knight 2010a, 2010b, 2013; Zappavigna, 2011, 2012, & 2014; Zappavigna & Martin 2018) and, in particular, ambient affiliation, which refers to the way online interlocutors commune with a mass online audience (Zappavigna, 2011, 2014), by proposing social bonds around which others can affiliate. ‘Bonds’ are often couplings of ideational and interpersonal meanings, with the interpersonal meanings often instantiated as choices from the appraisal system (e.g., Knight, 2013; Zappavigna, 2011, 2014; Zappavigna & Martin, 2018). These choices enact the social “work” that builds community, whether online or offline, as people who share similar opinions affiliate and commune around shared bonds. However, White (2020) distances from the abovementioned term of ‘affiliation’ by proposing the terms ‘alignment/dis-alignment.’ White (2020) has also shown how writers use appraisal resources to ‘embrace’ (corresponding broadly to Zappavigna’s ‘support’), ‘proselytize,’ or ‘spurn’ (corresponding broadly to Zappavigna’s ‘reject’) each other, based on whether the value position being proposed (dis)aligns with the putative audience. Likewise, Don (2017, p. 79) refers to ‘alignment’ as the construal of shared values, whereas she limits ‘affiliation’ to intimation of shared experiences, culture, or histories. Don’s (2017) discussions of ‘status’ and ‘contact’ are highly relevant to the present study. However, Don (2017) does not develop system networks for her work on alignment. Further, we argue here that whereas the appraisal and involvement systems are complementary, we need another system outside of appraisal to explicitly show the work people do to position each other within social hierarchies and according to how close or distant they are. In particular, we argue that this system should accommodate the realisation of both social hierarchy and social distance because both simultaneously have an impact on affiliation. Whereas it is beyond the constraints of this study to explicate the complementary workings of involvement and appraisal

systems, this will be further developed in future work. In the current paper, we propose to reconceptualise what has previously been termed the interpersonal discourse semantic system of involvement and argue that it works differently but alongside appraisal resources to position people within the online space, negotiating their various social positions.

The involvement system sits under the interpersonal variable of tenor, and the original SFL work conducted in this area comes from Cate Poynton's (1985, 1990) study of naming practices in Australia. Poynton (1985) introduces three aspects of tenor: (1) power; (2) contact; and (3) affect, the last of which has subsequently been developed within the appraisal framework (Martin & White 2005). POWER and CONTACT are closely related to Brown and Gilman's (1960) concepts of power and solidarity. In both these models, power is a continuum, ranging from equal to unequal, the basis of which can arise from a number of contextual factors including force, authority, status and expertise. Poynton defines 'status' as a matter of relative ranking with respect to some unevenly distributed but socially desirable object or standing or achievement: for example, wealth, professional/occupation, level of education, hereditary status, location of residence, and overseas travel. However, we suggest that the contextual factors of tenor that Poynton posits may be hard to distinguish due to being closely interwoven. In his seminal work *English Text*, Martin (1992) built on Poynton's model, making a further distinction between 'dominance' and 'deference' in the context of (unequal) status. However, for our model, we work simply with the differences in status within the social hierarchy as reflected in the discourse and not with the contextual factors that give rise to these differences.

With 'context,' Martin (1992) mainly refers to how well the interlocutors know each other and how frequently they communicate. Martin (1992), thus, discusses 'contact, terms of two variables: Whether the involvement has to do with family, work, or recreation; and whether it is regular or occasional. With 'status' (Poynton's 'power'), Martin refers to the relative position of interlocutors within a social hierarchy.

Poynton's work mainly focuses on naming (in the Australian context) because, she argues, names are the main markers of power and solidarity (Hudson, 1980, p. 125, as in Poynton, 1985). However, whereas Poynton's work marks a powerful beginning to mapping power and solidarity in language, our Chinese social media data yielded additional resources other than naming, as will be detailed below.

Our discussion of social hierarchy and social distance broadly corresponds to Don's (2017) proposal for analysis of stance and tenor relations via vertical (hierarchical) relations and horizontal relations (social distance). These, in turn, are said to be analysable by two parameters to describe the ways people are positioned along the two dimensions of power (status) and contact (solidarity), which she derives from Poynton (1985) and Martin (1992). Whereas this is similar in idea to what we propose here, we depart from Don (2017) and other prior literature in that we place such vertical and horizontal positioning both within the involvement system, as we argue that the two work together in affording or restricting choices available to interlocutors within a given context. Whereas Don locates her work on 'alignment' (values) and 'affiliation' (social distance) within the system of tenor, arguing that evaluative resources are salient in all positioning of interlocutors, we propose a framework that privileges negotiation which does not necessarily make reference to evaluative resources such as those outlined in the appraisal framework. Our proposal also further develops the dimension of status, to include finer subsystems, as introduced below, as well as interaction between the various subsystems proposed. Finally, where Don's work uses only two dimensions, we posit a third dimension, involvement type, or person, in order to distinguish and specify whether the person being positioned is the self (addressor/first person), the addressee (second person), or another discursively represented participant (third person).

### 2.2.1. Interpersonal Discourse Semantic Systems

Within a stratified model of language and context, the stratum below the interpersonal register variable of tenor has the complimentary interpersonal discourse semantic systems of appraisal, negotiation, and involvement (Martin 2004; Martin & White 2005). In terms of interpersonal meaning resources, appraisal has three subsystems: one for expressing positive and negative emotions and opinions (attitude), and a second for taking a stance in relation to others' stances on phenomena (engagement). appraisal resources are gradable, that is, they can be strengthened and weakened using the third subsystem of graduation. Appraisal is complemented by the negotiation system, which focuses on the interactive aspects of discourse, that is, on the tools to describe the ways interlocutors negotiate turn-taking in discourse through exchange structure (as presented in Martin, 1992; Martin & Rose, 2003).

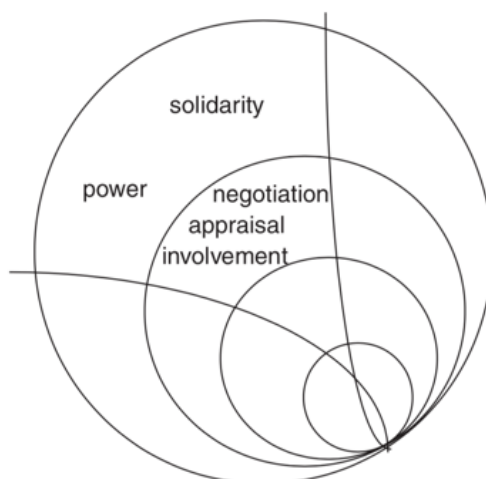


Figure 1. Interpersonal Semantic Systems and Tenor Variables (Martin & White, 2005, p. 33)

Figure 2 suggests that Martin and White (2005) position appraisal as the main discourse semantic system that construes the register variable of power (i.e., status). However, we argue that people negotiate power in a multiplicity of ways including as well as beyond appraisal resources. Also, Figure 2 shows that Martin and White (2005) consider involvement to be more relevant to the building of solidarity amongst interlocutors because certain names, technical terms, antilanguage and swearing are typically only available and used between people of particular social distance. However, social hierarchy also has an impact on these language choices because where one sits in the social hierarchy in relation to others also impacts on the meaning choices available. For example, a parent and child would be close in terms of social distance but unequal in terms of social hierarchy so the parent may be able to swear, whereas a child may not be “allowed” to by their more senior parent. Therefore, we propose the reconceptualised involvement system in order to encapsulate both social hierarchy and social distance (see Figure 3):

Register	Discourse semantics	Lexicogrammar	Phonology
Tenor	<b>Negotiation</b>		
	– speech function – exchange	– mood – tagging	– tone (& ‘key’)
power (status)	<b>Appraisal</b>		
	– engagement – affect – judgement – appreciation – graduation	– ‘evaluative’ lexis – modal verbs – modal adjuncts – polarity – pre/numeration – intensification – repetition – manner; extent – logico-semantics – vocation	– loudness – pitch movement – voice quality – phonaesthesia – [formatting]
solidarity (contact)	<b>Involvement</b>		
	– naming – technicality – abstraction – anti-language – swearing	– proper names – technical lexis – specialised lexis – slang – taboo lexis – grammatical metaphor	– ‘accent’ ... – whisper ... – acronyms – ‘pig latins’ – secret scripts

Figure 2. Interpersonal Semantics in Relation to Lexicogrammar and Phonology (Martin & White, 2005, p. 35)

### 2.2.2. Involvement System

The proposed revised involvement system with its subsystems of social hierarchy and social distance, and Involvement type is shown in Figure 3. Involvement type refers to the people who are at stake in any given interaction. It is necessary because the positioning always occurs in relation to oneself and others. We now describe these subsystems in more detail, exemplifying with instances from our Chinese data sets.

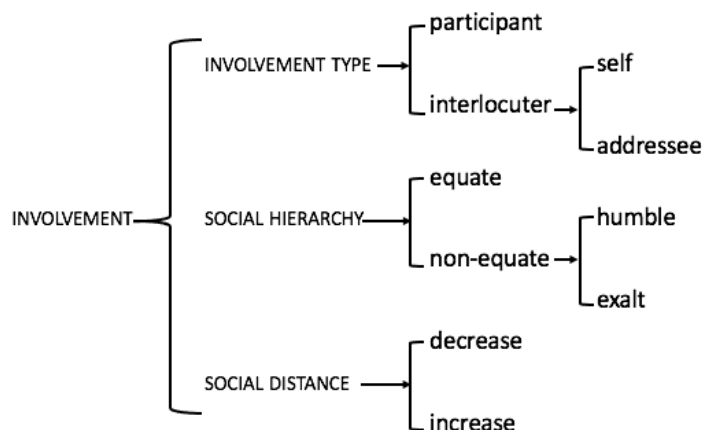


Figure 3. Involvement System

### 2.2.2.1. Involvement Type

Involvement type refers to who is involved in the interaction. It is divided into participant involvement and interlocutor involvement. Participant involvement refers to resources for negotiating relations between the addressor and a represented participant or between the addressee and a represented participant in the addressor's communication. It refers to how the status of a represented participant is negotiated by the addressor. This can be seen in Example 1, where the addressor (Interlocutor A) refers to a participant (你姐夫 *nǐ jiěfū*: your elder-brother-in-law, literally "your elder sister's husband") in her post:

#### Example 1: Participant Involvement

Interlocutor A

今晚跟你姐夫去看了新007 第一次看纯英文无字幕的电影啊 好激动 可惜是英式发音, 有些地方听不懂

(Literal translation: Tonight [I] went with **your elder-brother-in-law** to watch the latest 007. First time watching a movie fully in English without subtitles ah! So excited. Pity [it] was British accent. Some parts [were] not understood.)

Interlocutor B

哇哇哇!!! 感觉好爽阿

(Literal translation: Wawawa!!! Sounds so awesome ah)

In this message, the addressor, who is presumably the elder sister of the addressee, refers to a participant who is presumably her own husband using the kinship term 'your elder-brother-in-law' instead of "my husband" or simply the husband's name. That is to say, it is both her husband as well as her addressee's brother-in-law, a represented participant, whose social distance and place in the social hierarchy is being negotiated in relation to the addressee. This elevates the participant (her husband) to a higher status position in relation to the addressee (her younger sister), by highlighting his more senior role in the family hierarchy as the husband of the addressee's elder sister. Nothing about this reference stands out as being unusual to one of the authors of this paper, who is a native speaker of Chinese. As mentioned above, age holds significant status in Chinese culture, so an elder sister has higher status than her younger siblings; correspondingly, an elder sibling's partner, being equal to the partner, also enjoys a higher status than the partner's younger siblings. This reference discursively places the participant above the addressee in the social hierarchy, even though it can ultimately be interpreted as maintaining the unequal relation between the two siblings.

Interlocutor involvement contrasts with participant involvement in that it refers to resources used for negotiating tenor relations between the addressor (i.e., the self) and an addressee. In other words, this is about how a person refers to an addressee or refers to him or herself in relation to that addressee. Example 2 shows an instance of interlocutor: addressee involvement using the polite form of you 您 (*nín*):

**Example 2:** Interlocutor Involvement: Addressee

毛主席万岁!!!! 您的人民想念您!!!!

(Literal translation: Long live Chairman Mao!!!! **Your [honorific]** people miss **you [honorific]!!!!**)

Example 2 shows the poster dialogically addressing the late Mao Zedong not only with an honorific title “Zhuxi/Chairman” but also with a second person singular pronoun “you” (“thou”). In Chinese, there are two choices of this pronoun: 你 (*nǐ*) and 您 (*nín*), with the latter, *nín*, being the more formal and respectful form. Using *nín* to refer to the addressee, the addressor elevates the status of the addressee relative to himself. The formal nature of *nín* may also reflect an increase in social distance between the addressor and addressee.

Where Example 2 shows an instance of interlocutor (i.e., addressee involvement), Example 3 shows an instance of interlocutor: self involvement, as the addressor refers to himself in relation to the social hierarchy:

**Example 3:** Interlocutor Involvement: Self

老娘 (*lǎo niáng*: literally “old mother/woman,” meaning “I”)

老娘敢买楼还怕你跌吗，小样...([Since] *laoniang* dares to buy properties, would [*laoniang*] fear your drop [in property prices]? [You] silly...)

Alternative names are sometimes used in Chinese either as vocatives or to replace personal pronouns; and often such names mark hierarchical relationships. In this message, the presumably female addressor replaces the word “I” by referring to herself as an ‘old mother/woman,’ which symbolically elevates her own status in terms of age and generation, creating an authoritative and assertive position for herself. At the same time, because this self-reference is often used with a humorous effect, it can also signal an informal and close relationship in which impoliteness can be safely deployed humorously.

2.2.2.2. Social Hierarchy

Social hierarchy refers to the negotiation of status in relation to where people are seen to fit or where they are positioned within a social hierarchy. There are two options here: equate and nonequate. **Equate** is for negotiating equal status and power relations. As our data analysis shows that interlocutors most often treated each other as equals, we propose that this is the unmarked choice for social hierarchy. Example 4 shows an equate move through the use of a kinship term: 兄弟 (*xiōngdì*: brother/bro):

**Example 4:**

兄弟，跟这种垃圾别生气，其就是一个网特右畜！看看都是什么东西支持猪！就明白是怎么回事儿了！  
(Literal translation: *Xiongdì*, don’t get upset with trash like this. It is just an Internet troll and a rightist beast! [You] will get the picture as soon as [you] see what kind of stuff is supporting Pig (homophone to Zhu)!

*Xiōngdì* (“brother/bro”) as a kinship term is often used as endearment between male friends who are not kin. Because the term includes the morphemes *xiōng* (“elder brother”) and *dì* (“younger brother”), it can respectfully address another male of the same generation and, therefore, is considered to posit equal status and power relations between one interlocutor/participant and another.

The second choice, nonequate, refers to positioning as either lower or higher within the social hierarchy. Therefore, it has two choices: **humble**, for assigning lower status to one addressee/participant in relation to another; and **exalt**, for assigning higher status one addressee/participant in relation to another. Example 5 shows a nonequate: **humble** move with the term 这厮 (*zhè sī*: literally “this lowly male”), which assigns lower status to a participant:

**Example 5:**

政协委员、青州尧王集团总经理宗立成，这厮就是专拍高官的马屁精！普通工人、公务员有能力？有钱把自己的孩子送到国外念书吗？！不难想象，宗立成这个“代表”身份，就是他自己花钱、拍马，“买”来的，他当然要为高官说话了！

(Literal translation: Zong Licheng, CPPCC member and General Manager of Qingzhou Yaowang Group—this lowly male is pro with kissing the arse of high-ranking officials in particular. Would ordinary workers and civil servants have the capacity and money to send their children to study overseas?! It's not hard to imagine that Zong's role as a "deputy" is "bought" through spending money and kissing arse. Of course he will speak for the high-ranking officials!)

The combination of the demonstrative pronoun *zhè* (this) and the slightly derogative term *sī* (an archaic word for male servant or slave) assigns lower status to the addressee (or a participant) by comparing his status to that of an ancient male servant. It shows addressor subjectively assigns a low position to the participant who in reality enjoys a high social status.

Examples 2 and 3 both demonstrate nonequate: **exalt**. As discussed above, in Example 2, the addressor exalts the addressee through the use of the polite form of the second person pronoun 您 (*nín*), whereas in Example 3, the addressor exalts themselves by using the term *lǎo niáng*: "old mother/woman/I" to refer to themselves; thus, elevating themselves by referring to their seniority.

### 2.2.2.3. Social Distance

Social distance refers to how close people are to each other and how they work to maintain the social distance between themselves and their addressees and/or participants. It also shows how they may work to increase or decrease the social distance. It recognises the language choices made to do the work of either decreasing or increasing the social distance between the people involved. This is not a choice between X and Y but a relative choice. It has the two options of **decrease** (where an interlocutor uses linguistic resources to associate, affiliate, bond or decrease the social distance between themselves and another interlocutor or participant) and **increase** (when an interlocutor attempts to dissociate or increase the social distance with another interlocutor or participant).

Regarding social distance: decrease, examples include the endearment vocatives like 亲爱的 (*qīn'ài de*: dear/darling/sweetie) and kinship vocatives like 兄弟 (*xiōngdì*: "brother/bro"). Both suggest either close social distance or an attempt to reduce social distance, which corresponds with Poynton's (1990) work on terms of endearment. Example 6 uses 亲爱的 (*qīn'ài de*: "dear/darling/sweetie") to decrease the social distance:

#### Example 6:

Interlocutor C: 亲爱的, 我剪短发啦 (Darling, I cut my hair short)

Interlocutor D: 真的假的? ! 传张照片来瞧瞧~ (For real?! Send me a pic~)

Regarding social distance: **increase**, Example 5 demonstrates this through the use of 这厮 (*zhè sī*: this lowly male), which can signal disassociation or increase in social distance between the addressor and the participant being referred to because this derogatory term is only used in a distant relationship; however, this may change if the reference is used as irony.

We now introduce the data and methodology before discussing realisations of the different kinds of involvement. Finally, we discuss the results of the analysis. There are 18 possible combinations from the three involvement systems. Table 1 shows each of these with an example from our data.

Table 1. Realisations of the System Network of Involvement

		decrease			increase		
		self	addressee	participant	self	addressee	participant
Social Hierarchy	Social Distance	Ellipsis of “I” (我 wǒ)	兄弟 (xiōngdì: bro) as a vocative	镭基 (róngjī <sup>1</sup> : given name only)	我(wǒ: explicit Subject)	你好 (nǐ hǎo: explicitly greeting addressee)	朱镭基 (zhū róngjī: full name)
		Participant Type	咱俩 (zán liǎ: we two)	亲爱的 (qī'ai'de: honey)			
equate	Social Distance	老娘 (lǎo niáng: [I as] an old woman/mother)	有才华的哥哥姐姐们 (Yǒu cáihuá dí gēgē)	朱总 (zhū zǒng: Premier Zhu, shortened)	朕 (zhèn: I [as the emperor])	您 (nín: honorific you)	朱镭基总理 (zhū róngjī zǒnglǐ: Premier Zhu Rongji)
		Participant Type	爷爷我 (yéye wǒ: I [as your] grandpa)	亲爱的 (qī'ai'de: honey)	你姐夫(nǐ jiěfū: your brother-in-law)	麻烦再来一次(máfan zàilái yīcì: [May I]trouble [you] to do it again)	洋主子 (Yáng zhūzi: Western master)
Nonequate	Social Distance	爷爷我 (yéye wǒ: I [as your] grandpa)	有才华的哥哥姐姐们 (Yǒu cáihuá dí gēgē)	你姐夫(nǐ jiěfū: your brother-in-law)	朕 (zhèn: I [as the emperor])	您 (nín: honorific you)	朱镭基总理 (zhū róngjī zǒnglǐ: Premier Zhu Rongji)
		Participant Type	爷爷我 (yéye wǒ: I [as your] grandpa)	亲爱的 (qī'ai'de: honey)	你姐夫(nǐ jiěfū: your brother-in-law)	麻烦再来一次(máfan zàilái yīcì: [May I]trouble [you] to do it again)	洋主子 (Yáng zhūzi: Western master)
humble	Social Distance	我等屁民 (Wǒ děng pì mǐn: we shitizens)	老弟 (lǎo dì: old younger bro)	小朱 (xiǎo zhū: Lil Zhu)	臣附议! (chén fùyì: I [as the subject to a lord]	你这样的狗 (Nǐ zhèyàng de gǒu: a dog like you)	猪 (zhū: meaning pig while referring to Zhu)
		Participant Type	我等屁民 (ěr děng pì mǐn: you shitizens)	小样 (xiǎo yang: silly [you])	张张那个死人 (Zhāng zhāng nàgè sǐrén: Zhang that dead person)	第二 [the other subject's proposal]	这厮 (Zhè sī: this lowly male)
Nonequate	Social Distance	我等屁民 (Wǒ děng pì mǐn: we shitizens)	老弟 (lǎo dì: old younger bro)	小朱 (xiǎo zhū: Lil Zhu)	臣附议! (chén fùyì: I [as the subject to a lord]	你这样的狗 (Nǐ zhèyàng de gǒu: a dog like you)	猪 (zhū: meaning pig while referring to Zhu)
		Participant Type	我等屁民 (ěr děng pì mǐn: you shitizens)	小样 (xiǎo yang: silly [you])	张张那个死人 (Zhāng zhāng nàgè sǐrén: Zhang that dead person)	第二 [the other subject's proposal]	这厮 (Zhè sī: this lowly male)
humble	Social Distance	我等屁民 (Wǒ děng pì mǐn: we shitizens)	老弟 (lǎo dì: old younger bro)	小朱 (xiǎo zhū: Lil Zhu)	臣附议! (chén fùyì: I [as the subject to a lord]	你这样的狗 (Nǐ zhèyàng de gǒu: a dog like you)	猪 (zhū: meaning pig while referring to Zhu)
		Participant Type	我等屁民 (ěr děng pì mǐn: you shitizens)	小样 (xiǎo yang: silly [you])	张张那个死人 (Zhāng zhāng nàgè sǐrén: Zhang that dead person)	第二 [the other subject's proposal]	这厮 (Zhè sī: this lowly male)
Nonequate	Social Distance	我等屁民 (Wǒ děng pì mǐn: we shitizens)	老弟 (lǎo dì: old younger bro)	小朱 (xiǎo zhū: Lil Zhu)	臣附议! (chén fùyì: I [as the subject to a lord]	你这样的狗 (Nǐ zhèyàng de gǒu: a dog like you)	猪 (zhū: meaning pig while referring to Zhu)
		Participant Type	我等屁民 (ěr děng pì mǐn: you shitizens)	小样 (xiǎo yang: silly [you])	张张那个死人 (Zhāng zhāng nàgè sǐrén: Zhang that dead person)	第二 [the other subject's proposal]	这厮 (Zhè sī: this lowly male)

Table 1 shows, at least, one example of each of the 18 possible combinations of the three subsystems within involvement. Subsystems of both social distance and participant type are placed in the vertical columns with all three participant types listed under both “decrease” and “increase” as an attempt to visualise three systems within a two-dimensional table. For instance, 兄弟 (xiōngdì: bro) is an example of the combinational realisation of (1) social hierarchy: equate, (2) social distance: decrease, and (3) participant type: addressee. It should be noted that the involvement of all examples is determined within their specific context even though many carry a common-sense positioning.



### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Data

A combination of three different sets of online communication were provided to the researchers by an external partner as the data for this project. These include Chinese chat room messages; SMS messages; and posts from a Chinese nationalist Web forum named China Forum (中华论坛 *Zhōnghuá Lùntán*).

Whereas the details of the messages and interlocutors were not provided in this project, temporal information for the messages is included and the overarching relationships amongst the interlocutors can be inferred from the messages. The 250 chat room messages span from 2006 to 2010, and interlocutors appear to be a number of Chinese people living in France, who may be friends, colleagues, or perhaps classmates. The overall tenor of the communication is informal and friendly, and the inference of the interlocutors' geographical location can be triangulated with hints such as references to them being at specific locations in France, code-mixing between Chinese and French, and mentions of 中国城 (*Zhōngguó Chéng*: Chinatown) or 回国 (*huíguó*: returning to the country), which usually means returning to China.

The 250 SMS messages span from 2011 to 2013. An inference can be similarly made that the interlocutors are a number of Chinese people studying or working in the United States, but who often communicate with people in China and sometimes visit China themselves. The interlocutors appear to be friends and family members, although they sometimes also appear to be acquaintances or strangers.

The two posts forming the contrastive data are from the China Forum, which was known to the present authors as a key site for expressing sentiments of Chinese nationalism over politically volatile topics due to an emphasis on military affairs. The first of the two posts selected at random is on the topic of police injustice in the rape-murder case of a 13-year-old girl. The second is about corrupt government officials sending their children to study abroad. The original posts are accompanied by numerous comments, with some interlocutors engaging in direct conversations with one another: a familiar sight also in online English news commentary. The two posts are introduced mainly because they are richer in positioning of social hierarchy than the chat room and SMS data. In addition, they also differ considerably from the chat room/SMS messages not only in their more politically volatile content but also in the assumed distant and impersonal relationships amongst the interlocutors, who seek to 'embrace' like-minded strangers but 'spurn' (White, 2020) those with different political views. Whereas the original posts target an 'imagined audience' (Marwick & Boyd, 2011, p. 117) and, therefore, aim for an 'ambient affiliation' (Zappavigna & Martin, 2018), many commentaries can be considered explicitly dialogic as netizens respond to each other's comments. The introduction of participant type allows us to encapsulate both monologic and dialogic affiliation in this study.

Although the three data sets differ in genre and register, they have proven valuable in allowing us to develop the proposed, reconceptualised involvement framework. This is because we set out to find examples for all possible combinations of social hierarchy, social distance, and involvement type, without claiming to be exhaustive in the examples of realisation. It would be interesting to apply our framework to be tested in newer data sets and different genres, including those in other languages.

#### 3.2. Method

The initial messages contain metadata such as message ID, date and time, all of which were systematically removed except for the participant ID (which is useful information for dialogic data). The 250 SMS and 250 chat room messages and the two Web forum posts were imported into the computational environment of UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell, 2020) and annotated for all instances of involvement.

As with the appraisal analysis, a variety of units of length were selected and coded as instantiating involvement, from single words to a longer stretches of text. This is because interpersonal meanings are not limited to the boundary of a word, group, or clause, but tend to be prosodically realized (Halliday, 1979, p. 59; Martin & White, 2005, p. 19). The analysis was conducted by a coder (the second author) who is a native speaker of Chinese and who worked closely with the first author, an English-speaking researcher with experience in the analysis of appraisal resources in English.

#### 4. Examples of Realisations and Discussion

##### 4.1. Realisations of Social Hierarchy—Exalt and Nonexalt

In terms of social hierarchy, it is reasonable to assume that equate is the default option: any text without the explicit markers of unequal (**humble** or **exalt**) is considered equate. This is certainly the predominant choice of social hierarchy in the SMS and chat room data. Sometimes an explicit marker of equate may be present such as those listed in Table 2. On the other hand, explicit markers are required to identify both **exalt** and **humble**. Table 2 shows the different realisations of social hierarchy: **exalt** found in our data. These are where the addressor adopts an attitude of deference towards the other by exalting them.

Table 2. *Realisations of Social Hierarchy: Exalt*

Category	Subcategory	Subtype(s) and Examples
Person	Naming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-exalt (i.e., referring to older age and generation): 老娘 (<i>lǎo niáng</i>: literally “old mother/woman,” for a woman to exalt herself, used as “I”)</li> <li>• Addressor exalt (i.e., through honorific professional titles and kinship): 陈经理 (<i>Chén jīnglǐ</i>: Manager Chen)   有才华的哥哥姐姐们 (<i>Yǒu cáihuá dí gēgē jiějiěmen</i>: talented elder brothers and sisters)</li> <li>• Participant exalt (i.e., through kinship terms): 你姐夫 (<i>nǐ jiěfū</i>: your elder-brother-in-law, meaning “my husband”)</li> </ul>
	Pronoun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honorific pronoun: 您 (<i>nín</i>: you [honorific])</li> </ul>
Others	Nonperson exalt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-deprecation through negative reference to one’s own work: 没啥, 只是只鳞片爪: (<i>Méi shá, zhǐshì zhǐ lín piàn zhǎo</i>: no, it’s <u>nothing significant</u>)</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honorific choice of verb: 麻烦再来一次 (<i>Máfan zàilái yīcì</i>: (“may I”) <u>inconvenience</u> (you) to do it again.</li> </ul>

As Table 2 shows, the main realisation of social hierarchy: exalt in this data set is in naming resources, such as honorific titles and other titles marking people’s roles as being exalted due to contextual variables such as age, generation, family hierarchy, and status or prestige of profession. Often such titles explicitly exalt one interlocutor but implicitly humble another due to semantic reciprocity: that is, by referring to putative addressees as “elder brothers and sisters,” one implicitly positions oneself as the younger, humbled interlocutor. There are also polite forms of pronominal references and some word choices of either nominal or verbal groups that explicitly exalt through markers of politeness (i.e., “inconvenience” [麻烦]).

Table 3 shows the realisations of social hierarchy: **humble**, which is realised by two features: mood choices and naming practices:

Table 3. *Realisations of Social Hierarchy: Humble*

Category	Subcategory	Subtype(s) or Examples
Person	Mood choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of congruent, imperative mood without any mood particle: 好的, 注意休息 (<i>Hǎo de, zhùyì xiūxi</i>: that’s good. Pay attention to rest [meaning ‘have a good rest’]).</li> </ul>
	Naming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 这厮 (<i>zhè sī</i>: this lowly male. Derogatory term to refer to a third-person singular)</li> <li>• 是张张那个死人拍的 (<i>Shì zhāng zhāng nàgè sǐrén pāi de</i>: the photo was taken by <u>Zhang Zhang that dead person</u>).</li> </ul>

Mood metaphor is a common politeness feature in English in getting someone to do something (e.g., *Would you mind shutting the door* rather than *Shut the door* because commands are deemed rude). Likewise, a direct, nonmetaphorical mood choice in Chinese as in the case of Table 3 may serve to humble the addressee because unabridged commands are usually limited to people with a higher status. In addition, derogatory naming practices such as “lowly male” or “dead person” may also serve to humble a participant or addressee by comparing them to something else that is typically considered of low status.

##### 4.2. Realisations of Social Distance—Decrease and Increase

There are realisations of both decreasing and increasing the social distance in the data sets of SMS and chat room messages, however decrease is much more common with addressors deploying a greater variety of resources to do this.

We, thus, begin with decrease, where the addressor either uses language that shows a close social distance or works to decrease the social distance. In other words, these are often language resources used between familiars.

The corpus of the messages contains realisations of nearly all the subcategories of person (Wang 2017) and taboo lexis as proposed in Figure 2. A number of other realisations were also found and are detailed below. Within person, the proposed resources include mood tags, naming, pronouns, salutations, and speech levels. Within taboo lexis, the proposed resources include swearing and euphemism. In addition to these sets of resources that work to increase or decrease social distance, we also found a number of other resources that seem to be markers of decreased social distance through marking informal, spoken discourse, which is more available to people of closer social distance.

Table 4. *Categories of the Realisation of Decrease*

Category	Subcategory	Subtype(s)
person	Naming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vocative: Endearment terms: that is, 亲爱的 (<i>qīn'ài de</i>: dear/sweetie)</li> <li>• Vocative: kinship term: 兄弟 (<i>xiōngdì</i>: brother/bro) used to address a male friend</li> </ul>
	Pronouns	Dialectal pronouns: 咱俩 ( <i>zán liǎ</i> : us two which suggests in-group closeness) Implicit pronouns. Personal pronouns in Chinese dialogues are often left implicit between two interlocutors who occupy a close social distance because they can more confidently leave such information to be recovered from the context; conversely, they are often explicitly stated between two interlocutors with a wide social distance as the interlocutors make more effort to make such information explicit (i.e., between a customer and a taxi driver in the data). Imperative mood. Congruent mood choice such as imperative may be restricted to interlocutors with close social distance, especially when the interlocutor making a request is of lower or equal status to the other party. Declination of a command. The choice of a direct declination of a command may be restricted to interlocutors with close social distance, especially when the interlocutor declining a request is of lower or equal status to the other party.
	Speech Levels	Clause-end mood particles: numerous clause-end mood particles are considered to have the meaning potential of decreasing social distance because they are considered markers of informal discourse that is typical of locutions between people with decreased social distance, including 啦 <i>la</i> , 捏 <i>nie</i> , 哦 <i>ou</i> , 啊 <i>a</i> , 呀 <i>ya</i> , 哈 <i>ha</i> , 耶 <i>ye</i> , 么 <i>me</i> , 滴 <i>di</i> , 哟 <i>yo</i> , 喔 <i>wo</i> .
Taboo Lexis	Swearing	Using offensive language that does not genuinely insult the addressee is considered a realisation of decrease because its face-threatening potential largely limits its use to people of close social distance: for instance, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Derogative reference (to humble participant): that is, 傻逼 (<i>shǎ bī</i>: stupid cunt)   柴玲这个婊子 (<i>Chái líng zhège biǎo zi</i>: Chai Ling the bitch)</li> <li>• Vulgar language: 放屁 (<i>fàngpì</i>: fart/that's bullshit), 狗屎 (<i>gǒu shǐ</i>: dog shit), 帮我占个坑 (<i>bāng wǒ zhàn gè kēng</i>: help me occupy a [toilet] hole, meaning help me get a seat in the lecture theatre)</li> <li>• Swearing: 靠 (<i>kào</i>: fuck), <i>putain</i>, <i>putain</i> (used by Chinese living in France)</li> <li>• Insult: insulting the addressee in a joking manner: 鄙视你: (<i>Bǐshì nǐ</i>: [I] despise you)</li> </ul> Some offensive language, though reduced in intensity via euphemism, remains markers of close social distance due to its remaining face-threatening potential: for instance, <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 我擦 (<i>wǒ cā</i>: I wipe) as phonological euphemism for 我靠 (<i>wǒ cào</i>: (I) fuck!) by phonologically dropping the final vowel</li> </ul>
	Euphemism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 尼玛 (<i>ní mǎ</i>: no specific meaning) and 你妹 (<i>nǐ mèi</i>: you younger sister) as phonological euphemism for 你妈 (<i>nǐ mā</i>: you mother, which is an abbreviation of 你妈的 <i>nǐ mā de</i>: you mother-fucker)</li> <li>• 不 bt 不成电影 (<i>Bù bt bùchéng diànyǐng</i>: no perversity, no movie). Bt is an acronym of the pinyin of 变态 <i>biàn tài</i>: perverse/abnormal)</li> </ul>
Others	General informal and nonstandard word choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of dialect words in an overall Mandarin setting to highlight in-group affiliation of the same dialect: that is, 啥 (<i>shá</i>: what): a dialectal variation of 什么 (<i>shénme</i>: what) in Northern China; 老豆 (<i>lǎo dòu</i>: old bean): a Cantonese word for father; 明天可以看到 bb (<i>bb</i> is the Cantonese word for baby)</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using slang to highlight in-group affiliation of the same speech community: 木有 (<i>mù yǒu</i>: wood have) instead of 没有 (<i>meí yǒu</i>: don't have);</li> <li>• Internet buzzword: 神马的 (<i>shén mǎ de</i>: holy horse) instead of 什么 (<i>shén me</i>: what)</li> <li>• maths language: n 个人 (<i>n</i> people: many/an infinite number of people)</li> <li>• nonstandard (erroneous) character or play-on-word: 额 (<i>é</i>: forehead) instead of 呃 (<i>e</i>) , 碎觉 (<i>Suì jiào</i>: choppy sleep) instead of 睡觉 (<i>shuì jiào</i>: to sleep)</li> <li>• nonstandard transliteration of English: Using 88 (<i>bā bā</i>) or 白白 (<i>bái bái</i>: white white) instead of the more typical 拜拜 (<i>bái bái</i>: literally, “to offer sacrifice”) for “bye bye”</li> <li>• nonstandard syntax: 那我再通知我吧有消息 (<i>Nà nǐ zài tōngzhī wǒ ba yǒu xiāoxī</i>: Then, you inform me when you have any news). It is atypical to place the temporal clause after the main clause, which marks informal, less organised spoken discourse. This suggests that the speaker feels close enough to the addressee to not to carefully organise sentence structure)</li> </ul>
Multiplication of a word/morpheme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use duplication of mood particle (more than the typical way) 哦哦 (<i>o o</i>) , 恩恩 (<i>en en</i>) , 哇哇 (<i>wa wa</i>) , 哈哈 (<i>ha ha ha</i>, which is one more ‘ha’ than the unmarked form ‘ha ha’)</li> </ul>
General phonological choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• er-hua: adding an “er” sound as rhotacization of syllable finals, which is highly typical of spoken Beijing dialect. This is also considered a marker of informality and close social distance</li> </ul>
Use of abbreviation/contraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abbreviation: 你在 q 上吗 (<i>Nǐ zài q shàng ma?</i>: Are you on Q?) Q stands for QQ messenger. [你吃了吗? 没 <i>Nǐ chī le ma? Méi</i>: Have you eaten? Nope] <i>Méi</i> is used instead of the fuller form 没有吃 <i>Méiyǒu chī</i> or 没吃 <i>méiyǒu</i>. Likewise, 回见 <i>huí jiàn</i> is abbreviated from 回头见 (<i>huítóu jiàn</i>)</li> </ul>
Use of emoji	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• -_-   (cold sweat)</li> <li>• ellipsis...or . . . . ,</li> </ul>
Punctuation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• tilde ~</li> <li>• Duplication, triplication or multiplication of punctuation (e.g., ??   . . . or , , ,   or ,,,)</li> </ul>

Whereas Table 4 shows numerous markers of close social distance, we recognise that there are likely additional realisations showing a decrease in social distance that may exist in Chinese digitally mediated communication.

### 4.3. Social Distance—Increase

There are only a few isolated instances of social distance: increase in the SMS and chat room messages. Here, an interlocutor may reveal wide social distance or seek to increase social distance between themselves and another interlocutor through explicit inclusion of first and second personal pronouns, politeness strategies that mark formality, or other markers of out-group membership. For example:

你好，我是王玉成朋友。( *Nǐ hǎo, wǒ shì wángyùchéng péngyǒu*. Literal translation: *Hello [you well]. I'm WANG Yucheng's friend.*)

Even though the interlocutor in this post displays friendliness with a self-introduction, they also clearly display wide social distance through the formal greeting “*Nǐ hǎo, wǒ shì*: saying hello to you, I am...,” which explicitly includes “you” and the explicit “I” in the self-introduction. In another example, the use of a question tag that softens the force of the command realised through congruent imperative mood also increases the social distance by suggesting hesitation in making a direct request:

那你先帮我带一张行吗? (*Nà nǐ xiān bāng wǒ dài yī zhāng xíng ma?*: Then, you help me bring a piece, is that okay?)

Here, the interlocutor explicitly addresses the addressee with “you.” In addition, the tag question increases the level of politeness through signalling uncertainty, so it also marks an increase in social distance.

Lastly, markers of out-group membership, especially those metaphorical insults referring to different human castes or animal species such as “dog” or “opera singer” in Table 1, also serve to increase social distance.

## 5. Discussion of Results

Involvement resources in both the SMS and chat room messages heavily favour social distance (**decrease/increase**) resources over social hierarchy (**equate/nonequate**) ones. Also favoured are interlocutor involvement (mainly addressee involvement but also some instances of self involvement) over participant involvement. More specifically, the most frequently occurring form is the addressee involvement of decrease. It seems that in this context, the decrease of the social distance perhaps contributes to the ‘support’ and ‘ambient affiliation’ that Zappavigna (2011, 2014, 2019) speaks of, however we have yet to cross reference the interlocutors’ appraisal choices with their involvement choices to see the interaction between these two systems and the way they may work together in this social space.

In contrast to this, the two lengthy online forum texts have markedly more instances of social hierarchy involvement, especially participant involvement. In other words, in these forum texts, posters frequently position participants in the text in relation to where they sit in the social hierarchy. There are also many more resources of social distance (increase) in these forum texts. This is clearly not the kind of context that favours close social distance.

Table 5. *Favoured Involvement Choices Across the Data Sets*

Data Source	Favoured Involvement Resource & Type
SMS	Social Distance With Addressee Type
Chat Room	Social Distance With Addressee Type
China Forum Posts	Social Hierarchy With Participant Type

Whereas social distance and social hierarchy are two simultaneous systems with examples of all combinational selections found in the data, the findings above raise an interesting question of how the two systems impact on one another and whether the selection in one system increases the probability of certain selection in the other. This will be a topic for future study.

## 6. Conclusion

In this study, we have reconceptualised involvement, a discourse semantic system on which little work has been done to date. We extend involvement to take into consideration not only social distance (contact) but also social hierarchy (status) and involvement type (person); the inclusion of social hierarchy is necessary because it not only carries strong implications on affiliation as does social distance but also grants recognition to the higher sensitivity to this type of positioning in Chinese digitally mediated communication. Placing both social distance and social hierarchy within one system of discourse semantics enables examination of the ensemble of discursive resources that position social roles both vertically and horizontally.

The reconceptualisation of the interpersonal discourse semantic system of involvement has enabled us to begin to analyse the complex social relations in Chinese social media texts which could not be adequately captured with the appraisal analysis. This is because appraisal does not have the subsystems to analyse the resources interlocutors use to specifically position themselves and others in terms of relative social distance and within a social hierarchy. These resources were found to be influential factors in the way people navigate the online social space in specific instances of Chinese social media. Further work needs to be undertaken in terms of applying the involvement system to a larger data set as well as cross referencing involvement resources with appraisal resources within the one data set, to begin to unravel and make visible how these two interpersonal discourse semantic systems work together within the online social space.

### Notes

‘Rongji’ (镕基) in the online forum corpus refers to the given name of Zhu Rongji, China’s former premier (1998–2003). Other references to him in this table include ‘Zhu Rongji’ (朱镕基), ‘Premier Zhu’ (朱总), ‘Lil Zhu’ (小朱) and ‘pig’ (猪 Zhu).

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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