

A Sociolinguistic Study of
Addressing, Openings and Closings
in Contemporary Chinese
Personal Letters

当代汉语私人书信称谓、起始及
结束语社会语言学研究

曹湘洪 著



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Preface

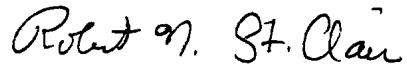
Research is a search for insight and understanding. It is an attempt to make theoretical sense of information from the point of view of a particular discipline. Many times, scholars from different disciplines verge on discovering the same insights and they welcome corroborating evidence from their fellow researchers. Such is the case with work of Xianghong CAO. *A Sociolinguistic Study of Addressing, Openings and Closings in Contemporary Chinese Personal Letters*, for example, is a scholarly work that has emerged from the field of linguistics. What makes this work different is the fact that it was written as a sociolinguistic study. This means that it is an interdisciplinary venture that covers both linguistic and sociological information. In one of my latest books on *The Sociology of Knowledge as a Model for Language Theory: Language as a Social Science* (St. Clair 2006), I distinguish between such interdisciplinary research as “sociolinguistics” and “the sociology of knowledge.” The former tends to be more linguistics than sociology and the latter includes far more information on social theory. Although this publication by Dr. Cao is entitled a sociolinguistic study, it is really a study in the sociology of knowledge. This makes the research even more valuable because it has a greater explanatory power in explaining phenomenon across two disciplines.

This work provides both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of the study of addressing in Chinese. What makes this work particularly pleasing as a research monograph is that it includes numerous charts and graphs that lucidly explain how the phenomenon works. These clarifications can be found throughout

the book (figures 4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.2, and 6.1). One of the theoretical implications of this work is that it provides evidence for the social space of family relationships are externalized into the cultural space of letter writing. Each society has its own social space. It is only when one compares and contrasts these social forces and patterns with other societies that one becomes aware of them as cultural differences. This approach to culture is known as the social construction of culture (St. Clair 2006). This research provides evidence for the study of social relationships in both the area of linguistics and sociology. Another theoretical implication of this work is that it includes both print culture and oral culture. The patterns that one finds in written documents have emerged from social relationships within a family and the expression of these relationships are based on verbal exchanges. When they are shared with others in the form of print culture, they still remain as oral patterns of communication. It is only when one transcends these patterns and communicate in the formal use of Chinese that the pattern becomes predominantly a print culture phenomenon. This research provides interesting written evidence for the social and cultural patterns existing within an oral tradition. Another implication of this research has to do with Confucian Principles. Dr. Cao has written about this influence in Chinese culture and the tables and graphs within the book brilliantly illustrate these principles in the form of relationships between the various strata within Chinese society. If this study were done by a Westerner, he would have probably missed this insight.

A Sociolinguistic Study of Addressing, Openings and Closings in Contemporary Chinese Personal Letters is a valuable contribution to the fields of linguistics, sociology, and philosophy. It provides linguistic evidence for terms of addressed used within the structure of family relationships. It provides an overview into the social relationships that

exist within a family, and it includes an overview and a clarification in linguistic terms of the Confucian Princes, one of the philosophical foundations of Chinese culture.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Robert N. St. Clair". The script is cursive and elegant, with the first name "Robert" and last name "Clair" being more prominent than the middle initial "N.".

Robert N. St. Clair,
Distinguished Professor of Scholarship and Creativity
University of Louisville

Acknowledgements

The present study is a revised version of my doctoral thesis finished at the University of New South Wales, Australia in 2004. I have been deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Rod Gardner, for his great assistance and inspiration. His extraordinary patience, enthusiasm, and invaluable advice and guidance helped me overcome many difficulties, and had a great influence on this thesis. I would also like to express my gratitude to Professor Peter Collins and Dr. Louise J. Ravelli for their valuable suggestions, as well as to Professor John Brotherton for his generous help with the formatting of the very final version of the text. Special acknowledgment must go to Professor Zhu Wanjiang, who offered good advice on the concept of politeness during the time of my external research in Beijing. Particular thanks are given to my students, colleagues and friends in Xinjiang Normal University who provided me with the personal letters that comprised the source of data for this research. Without their co-operation this study would not have been possible. My sincere thanks also go to Kang Yuanfei, Xing Mingang, Ben Hamblin, Wang Li, Maria Oujo, Emilia Djonov, Emmi Mikedakis, Gavin Farrell, Ke Wanli, Li Haihua, Gunnar Mollenbeck, Cui Jiangying, Zhang Shaosan, Zhang Erjie and Xu Shaorong for the immense moral support, encouragement, help, and kindness they gave me throughout much of my research.

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Abstract

Investigations into address forms, openings and closings in the sociolinguistics and discourse fields have largely focused on oral communication. This study has set out to examine linguistic and pragmatic features of addressing, opening and closing behaviours in relation to the effects of social factors and the cultural constraints in actual language use in Chinese personal letters. The aim of this research is to provide a better understanding of the forms, functions, sequences and uses of utterances in these three routinized speech behaviours in written interaction and intercultural communication in the Chinese context. Using a database of 259 personal letters written by Chinese in Xinjiang Autonomous Regions, an analysis and discussion are presented, using both qualitative and some simple quantitative techniques.

Findings reveal that there is a variety of address forms that Chinese writers use in personal letters, which is a reflection of the diversity and elaborateness of this practice in Chinese. In terms of openings and closings, this study suggests that in Chinese personal written interaction, these two behaviours are highly ritualized and closely structured, consisting of a series of phatic and routine speech acts to achieve the establishment and the consolidation of interpersonal relationships between writer and recipient. With respect to the relationship between language variation and social variables, the study shows that the choices of language patterns or sequences vary with generation, gender, the level of authority, the level of intimacy and social distance. This research also reflects that the influence of Confucian ethics in the

Chinese cultural context has a considerable impact on Chinese people's linguistic performance in terms of addressing practice, openings and closings in personal letters.

Findings from this study highlight three issues. First, it is suggested that there is much to be gained in pragmatic studies of phatic communion, speech acts and politeness by shifting the focus from the single unit to the discourse domain. Second, the influences of social variables in language use are extremely complex, and analysis needs to take this into account. Third, there is a need to incorporate the larger cultural context as a determinant factor in the study of speech acts and behaviours in communication.

Key words: address forms, openings and closings; contemporary Chinese personal letters; sociolinguistic study

内 容 提 要

国内外现有的对称谓语、起始语及结束语的研究绝大多数是放在口语交际上，这种现象显然不能满足当今语言学和社会语言学研究内容和方法发展的需要。本研究借鉴多学科理论，从多维的视角，采用定量和定性相结合的办法，对 259 封当代汉语私人书信中的称谓语、起始语及结束语的语言形式和语用特征以及个人、社会和文化因素对其使用的影响进行了系统全面的分析。研究的目的是为人们理解中国文化背景下的汉语私人书信中这三种言语行为的形式、功能、序列结构和语言使用提供有价值的信息。

研究结果表明，汉语私人书信中的称谓语形式呈“多样化”和“复杂化”趋势。这说明较之口语中的称谓系统，文字交际中的称谓语具有更广泛的外延内容和更为深刻的内涵意义，体现出各种复杂的社会关系和汉文化传统。另外，起始语和结束语在汉语书信中具有高度规约化特征，写信人采取一系列寒暄语来实现建立和加强与收信人之间人际关系的目的。研究还发现：写信人的起始语和结束语的语言选择与他们的社会角色、年龄、性别、权势以及与收信人关系的亲疏程度有着紧密的联系。这再一次说明了汉文化中孔子伦理观对中国人言语行为的深刻影响。

基于本研究结果，我们可以得出三点启示：第一，言语行为以及相关的寒暄语及礼貌语的语用研究要突破原有的单句框架，要注重该类语言的篇章性，把动态观和序列观引入此类研究。第二，社会因素对语言使用的影响复杂而深奥，要从多维的角度来观察社会因素对语言的制约作用，包括它们自身的相互作用。第三，广博的文化背景也对交际中出现的言语行为发挥某种决定性作用。在探讨语言和社会问题时，应注重宏观把握文化限制和微观分析个人和社会因素，这样会对影响语言变异的因素做出较全面的考察。

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