

Change of Functions of the First Person Pronouns in Chinese

VICKY TZUYIN LAI & ZYGMUNT FRAJZYNGIER
University of Colorado, Boulder

In Classical Chinese, there were four first person pronouns: *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and zero-pronoun¹, with the following functions: *Wu2* was the default marking the speaker; *Wo3* coded contrast between the speaker and others; *Yu3* was used when talking about the speaker in connection with heaven, kings, or death; *Yu2* was used exclusively by kings and by speakers with high social status. Zero-pronoun is primarily used in the second mention. Various social changes have motivated the reduction of pronouns. In Mandarin², only *wo3* and zero-pronoun are in use. *Yu3* is lost because the domains where it was used are no longer taboo. *Yu2* exists only in modern artists' speech. *Wo3* is retained as the default while *wo3* with a longer vowel and full fall-rise tone codes contrastive function. Zero-pronoun is retained. The findings imply that the lack of functional motivation for a form leads to its loss.

Introduction

¹ Numbers indicate tones.

² "Chinese" here refers to written language that might have been used in various spoken language/dialect groups in classical times. "Mandarin" refers to the formal language that is spoken and written in China and Taiwan nowadays.

Classical Chinese (BC479-AD220) had five forms to encode the first person singular: *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and Zero Pronoun. In modern Mandarin (1900-now), only *Wo3* and Zero Pronoun remained. The research question of the study is as follows. What motivated the reduction of forms? In order to answer this question, we need to look at functions coded by the five forms in Classical Chinese and the functions of the two forms in modern Mandarin.

Pulleyblank (1995) pointed out that the syntactic distributions and semantic denotations of the five pronouns in Classical Chinese overlap, but did not investigate any difference in their functions. Other works looked at pragmatic functions in more recent Chinese. Lee (1999) found that in 18th-century Chinese, the variation between singular and plural first person pronouns could convey social meanings. Xiong (1998) suggested that the zero pronoun in modern Mandarin was used to convey modesty, shyness, self-denigration, and respect for others.

The present paper suggests that the five pronouns had different pragmatic functions. We hypothesize that because the social norms have

changed, i.e., the need for the overt marking of some pragmatic functions is no longer needed, some of the pronouns are reduced. In addition, pronouns *wu2* and *wo3* merged.

In what follows, we describe functions of the five forms in Classical Chinese. We then examine first person pronouns in Modern Mandarin. Finally, we propose that the loss of function motivates the loss of forms.

Data

For the Classical Chinese (BC500-AD250), we used *Lunyu* “Confucius Book” (BC479) and *Zhuangzi* “Daoist Book” (BC286). *Lunyu* is a written record of questions and answers between Confucius and his disciples that took place in the state of *Lu*, (northeastern part of contemporary China). The language in *Lunyu* mainly reflects the *Lu* dialect in Classical Chinese. *Zhuangzi* is a philosopher from the State of *Song*, located south of *Lu* state. The period of Classical Chinese lasts for about 700 years, from the birth of Confucius to the end of the *Han* Dynasty in AD220. In the first five pages of *Lunyu*, there are 101 entries for *wu2*, 46 entries for *wo3*, 0 entries for

yu2, 19 entries for yu3, and 10 instances of the unmarked first person.

Given the absence of yu2 in *Lunyu*, we examined 9 entries for yu2 in

Zhuangzi. We also checked some pre-Classical Chinese on oracle bones

described by Chen (1956). For Modern Mandarin (AD1900-now), we used

Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Mandarin Chinese, which

contains five million words and reflects the Mandarin Chinese written and

spoken in Taiwan. In addition, we also looked at the frequency of 1st

person pronouns in the Academia Sinica Recent Chinese Corpus.

The function of wu2 in Classical Chinese

Wu2 seems to be the default pronoun that appears most frequently as first

mention. It occurs pre-verbally 85% of the times in the subject position

(examples (1) and (2)). Wu2 also functions as a possessive pronoun (14%

of the total), e.g. “my behavior” in (1) and “my theory” in (3):

(1) 吾 wu2 日 三 省 吾 wu2 身
1SG-SUB day three reflect 1SG-POS body
“I reflect on my behavior three times a day.”

(2) 夏 禮 吾 wu2 能 言 之 ,
Xia-PRO rite 1SG-SUB can speak it,
杞 不 足 徵 也
Qi-PRO NEG enough reference ye-PART.

“*Xia rite, I can explain. Qi rite, I don’t have enough reference.*”

- (3) 吾 **wu2** 道 一 以 貫 之
1SG-POS dao one and through it
“*My theory can connect all together.*”

See also the use of *wu2* in examples (8) and (9) later in this paper.

The function of wo3 in Classical Chinese

Wo3 is either the subject (39%) pre-verbally as in (4) and (5), or the object

(59%) post-verbally as in (5).

- (4) 賜 也，爾 愛 其 羊， 我 **wo3**
Ci-PRO ye, 2SG-SUB love the goat, 1SG-SUB
愛 其 禮
love the rite.

“*Ci, you love the goat (for sacrifice in the rite). I love the rite.*”

- (5) 孟孫 問 孝 於 我 **wo3**，我 **wo3** 對 曰 無 違
Menswen ask filial to 1SG-OBJ, 1SG-SUB to say no disobey
“*Menswen asked me about filial. I said to him ‘no disobedience’.*”

Wo3 contrasts the speaker with other participants. In (4), Confucius was addressing his disciple named *Ci* and *wo3* occurs after the mentioning of the proper name *Ci* and the second person singular subject. Confucius was contrasting the difference of their viewpoints with respect to sacrificing the goat in the rite. The example can be interpreted as “Contrary to you *Ci*, I prefer the rite itself.” In (5), Confucius is telling the disciple *Fanchi* how

he answered *Menswen*'s question about the essence of the notion "filial".

The form *wo3* is thus in contrast with the participant named *Menswen*.

Further evidence supporting the contrastive function of *wo3* can be found in (6). Confucius was retelling the story to a group of disciples about what happened when a farmer asked him questions. *Wo3* is used contrastively.

- (6) 有 鄙夫 問 於 我 *wo3* , 空 空 如 也
Exit farmer ask to 1SG-OBJ,empty empty like PART
"There was a farmer who asked me. I had nothing to teach"

Even when *wo3* functions as possessive pronoun (2%), it still has contrastive function:

- (7) 三 人 行 , 必 有 我 *wo3* 師
three people walk, must exist 1SG-POS teacher
"In a group of people, there must be a teacher of mine."

In (8) and (9) *wo3* is used twice in contrastive function.³ The default pronoun *wu2* is required if the speaker intends to refer to himself in

non-contrastive function:

- (8) 我 *wo3* 不 欲 人 之 加 諸 我 *wo3* 也
1SG-SUB NEG want people POS impose onto 1SG-OBJ ye
吾 *wu2* 亦 欲 無 加 諸 人
1SG-SUB also want nothing impose onto people.

"I don't want others to impose anything onto me. I also don't

³ The unit of utterance does not refer to the boundary of the sentences. It is intended to refer to a semantically complete and coherent production that makes sense. Note that there is no punctuation in the original text of the Confucius book. Scholars added the punctuations later on.

want to impose anything onto other people.”

- (9) 季氏 使 閔子騫 為 費 宰。
Jishi-PRO make/invite Minziqian-PRO become Fei Minister.

閔子騫 曰：善 為 我 wo3 辭 焉。如 有 復
Minziqian say: nice for 1SG-OBJ reject PART. if existback

我 wo3 者，則 吾 wu2 必 在 汶 上 矣
1SG-OBJ person, then 1SG-SUB must on Wen on yi-PART

“Jishi asked Minziqian to be the minister of Fei. Minziqian said, ‘Say something nice and reject the position for me. If someone comes back to (persuade) me again, I shall be (not around, but) on the river Wen.’”

There is no exception to the contrastive function of wo3 in *Lunyu*.

The function of yu2 in Classical Chinese

In *Lunyu*, there are no instances of *yu2*. Chen (1956) found *yu2* in pre-Classical Chinese on the oracle bones dated back to *Shang* dynasty (BC1600-BC1066). He found that *yu2* is used exclusively by the kings when they refer to themselves. We hypothesize that the usage by emperors continued in Classical Chinese. The analysis of the 9 entries of *yu2* in *Zhuan-zi* confirms this hypothesis. *Guangchengzi* in (10) and *Shuen* in (11) are emperors.

- (10) 廣成子 曰 來！ 余 yu2 語 女
Guangchengzi-PRO say, come! 1SG-SUB tell 2SG-OBJ
“Guangchengzi said, ‘Come! I tell you.’”

- (11) 舜 以 天下 讓 善 卷， 善 卷 曰：
Shuen-PRO to nation let good book, good book say,

余 *yu2* 立 於 宇宙 之 中
1SG-SUB stand among universe MOD middle

“*Shuan wrote the book entitled ‘let the virtuous people rule the nation’ and the book says, ‘I, in the middle of the universe’*”

*The function of *yu3* in Classical Chinese*

There are 19 entries of *yu3* in *Lunyu*. Chen (1956) considered *yu3* a graphic alternative to *yu2* in both pre-Classical and Classical Chinese.

However, we suspect that *yu3* and *yu2* could be used interchangeably in Classical Chinese. At the first sight, Chen’s statement seems to hold because *yu3* is indeed used by Confucious when he quotes the emperor *Wu*

(BC1066-BC221) in (12):

(12) 舜 有 臣 五 人 而 天下 治 · 武 王
Shuen-PRO have minister five people and nation rule. Wu King
曰 : 予 *yu3* 有 亂 臣 十 人 ·
say, 1SG-SUB have mess minister 10 people.”

“*Shuen had 5 ministers and managed the nation well. Wu king said, I have 10 capable ministers (in a messy era).*”

Other examples in *Lunyu*, however, demonstrate that *yu3* indicates lower status of the speaker in comparison to other concepts (e.g. death, heaven, emperor). Support for this hypothesis is provided by examples (13), (14), and (15). In (13), Confucius used *yu3* to contrast himself relative to

heaven. In (14), he talked about his funeral and used *yu3* when he referred to his own death. In (15), Confucius and his disciples were chased after by *Huankui* in a life and death situation. He comforted his disciples by saying that the heaven would take care of him no matter what *Huankui* might do to him:

- (13) 子 見 南子， 子路 不 說。
 Confucius meet Nanzi-PRO, Zilu-PRO NEG Happy.
 夫子 矢 之 曰：予 *yu3* 所 否 者，
 Confucius swear it say, “1SG-SUB if wrong behavior,
 天 厭 之
 heaven curse it

“Confucius met lady Nanzi. Zilu was not happy about it. Confucius said, ‘if I did anything wrong, may heaven curse it’”

- (14) 且 予 *yu3* 縱 不 得 大 葬，
 And 1SG-SUB though NEG get big funeral,
 予 *yu3* 死 於 道 路 乎？
 1SG-SUB die by road WH?

“Though I don’t get the great funeral, would I die beside the road?”

- (15) 子 曰：天 生 德 於 予 *yu3*，
 Confucius say: heaven bore virtue to 1SG-OBJ,
 桓 魋 其 如 予 *yu3* 何？
 Huankui-PRO he to 1SG-OBJ what?”

“Confucius said, ‘Heaven bestowed me with virtue. What could Huankui do to me?’”

In all those sentences, Confucius puts himself in a context where there are concepts of near-death, death, and heaven. Together with the context of

emperor in (12), the function of *yu3* is to lower the status of the speaker in comparison to other concepts.

The function of Zero pronoun in Classical Chinese

The 10 instances of unmarked first person pronoun ('zero pronouns') in the first five pages of *Lunyu* are in complements of verbs of saying.

- (16) 冉求 曰：Zero Pronoun 非 不 說 子 之 道，
 Ranqiu-PRO say: Zero Pronoun NEG NEG like Confucius' theory,
 Zero Pronoun 力 不 足 也。 子 曰：…
 Zero Pronoun power not enough ye.” Confucius say, …

“Ranqiu say, '(ZERO) did not dislike Confucius's doctrine, (ZERO) energy is not enough ye.’” Confucius replied, …”

There are, however, instances where the complement of verbs of saying do have overt pronouns. The overt coding is motivated by other structural considerations as in the following example where the first person pronoun is the first part of a nominal conjunction:

- (17) 子 曰：吾 *wu2* 與 回 言 終 日，不 違
 Confucius say: 1SG-SUB and Hui talk all day, NEG against
 如 愚。 Zero Pronoun 退 而 省 其 私， 亦
 as stupid. Zero Pronoun return and reflect its details, but
 足 以 發。 回 也， 不 愚
 enough to be inspiring. Hui ye-PART, NEG stupid

“Confucius said, ‘I talked with Hui all day. No argument as if he were stupid. (ZERO) returned home and reflected on the details. It was but inspiring. Hui is not stupid.’”

Summary of functions in the first person singular pronouns in Classical Chinese

In Classical Chinese, *wu2* is the default form when a speaker makes reference to self. *wo3* is used when the speaker contrasts self with other referents. *yu2* is used exclusively by emperors in Pre-Classical times and by speakers with higher social status in Classical Chinese. *yu3* is used when the speaker intends to lower his⁴ status in comparison to other concepts in the context. Zero pronoun is used as a complement of verbs of saying in quoted speech by people with lower status and in the second mention by people with higher status. A summary table is shown below.

1sg pronoun	Contrastive	Lowering speaker's status	Quoted speech
<i>wu2</i>	✗	✗	✗
<i>wo3</i>	✓	✗	✗
<i>yu2</i>	✗	By emperor only	✗
<i>yu3</i>	✗	By speakers vs. heaven, emperor & death	✗
Zero pronouns	✗	✓	✓

Table 1. Summary of functions of the first singular pronouns *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and Zero pronouns in *Lunyu*

The diachronic change of the first singular pronouns

To empirically determine what forms of the first person singular pronouns

⁴ Only male referents were found in *Lunyu*.

are lost, we examined the four pronouns in the corpora of recent Chinese and modern Mandarin. The frequency of occurrence is summarized in Table 2. We can see that the form *wu2* is disappearing, *wo3* has become the default first person singular pronoun, *yu2* disappeared completely but then came back alive in modern Mandarin, and zero pronouns seem to always remain in the language.

Chinese	Classical (Lunyu)	Recent (5 novel)	Modern (balanced)
<i>Wu2</i>	101	63	27
<i>Wo3</i>	46	1000	5000
<i>Yu2</i>	0	0	32
<i>Yu3</i>	17	0.4	0
Zero pronoun	yes	Yes	yes

Table 2. Frequency of occurrence of the first singular pronouns *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and Zero pronouns in Classical Chinese, recent Chinese, and modern Mandarin

To determine whether *wu2* and *yu2* truly exist in modern Mandarin, we looked at the 27 occurrences of *wu2* and the 32 occurrences of *yu2*. None of the 27 *wu2* comes from spoken data. *Wu2* occurs only in formal written documents that imitate ancient writing style. All the 32 *yu2* were used by an artist who tried to convey that he looks down on the mundane world. At this point, we can confidently suggest that the forms of *wu2*, *yu2*, and *yu3* are truly lost in modern Mandarin.

Motivations for the loss of forms

Our findings indicate that the loss of a form results from the loss of a function. *Yu2* and *yu3* are lost because the functions they used to code are no longer required in the society. The function of *yu2* is lost because there is no emperor since the monarchy was abolished in China in 1911. The function of *yu3* is lost because taboo topics are coded in some other ways (e.g. lexical items and figurative expressions) in modern Mandarin. The function of *wu2* is taken over by *wo3* and hence the loss of the form *wu2*.

Why would the function of *wu2* be replaced by *wo3*, when *wu2* was the more frequent and less marked form, while *wo3* was less frequent and more marked one? The phonetically similar *wu2* and *wo3* merged. The reason *wo3* took over the default function follows behavior of other marked forms, which lose their marked nature and become default forms. In new grammaticalization, by *wo3* plus stress codes the contrastive focus in modern Mandarin.

In conclusion, our finding suggests that lack of functional motivation may lead to the reduction of the form and the more marked form assumes

the function of the less marked form.

References

- Chen, Mengjia 陳夢家. 1956. *殷虛卜辭綜述* "Oracle Bones". Beijing: Kexue Publication.
- Frajzyngier, Zygmunt . 1997. "Pronouns and agreement: systems interaction in the coding of reference". *Atomism and binding*. 1997 ed. by. Hans Benis, Pierre Pica, and Johan Rooryck. 115-140. Dordrecht: Foris.
- Frajzyngier, Zygmunt, and Erin Shay. 2003. *Explaining language structure through systems interaction*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Mao, LuMing R. 1996. Chinese First Person Pronoun and Social Implicature. *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 1996(7) 3-4. 106-128.
- Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1995. *Outline of Classical Chinese Grammar*. Vancouver: UBC Press
- Tsai, xi qin. 1994. *Analects of Confucius (3rd edition 2003)*. Beijing: Sinolingua
- Xiong, Xueliang. 1998. First person zero anaphor as a cognitive unit in Chinese. *Word* 1998(49)3