

Change of functions of the first person pronouns in Chinese

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In Classical Chinese, there were four first person pronouns: *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and a 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. The zero pronoun is primarily used in the second situation. Various social changes have motivated the reduction of pronouns. In Mandarin,² only *wo3* and the zero pronoun are in use. *Yu3* has been lost because the domains in which 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. The zero pronoun is also retained. The findings imply that the lack of functional motivation for a form leads to its loss.

1. Introduction

Classical Chinese (BC479-AD220) had five forms to encode the first person singular: *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and the zero pronoun. In modern Mandarin (1900-present), only *wo3* and the zero pronoun remain. 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 the 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

1. Numbers indicate tones.

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

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, the pronouns *wu2* and *wo3* merged.

In what follows, we describe the principle 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.

2. Data

For 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* (the northeastern part of contemporary China). The language in *Lunyu* mainly reflects the *Lu* dialect of Classical Chinese. *Zhuangzi* is a philosopher from the State of *Song*, located south of *Lu* state. The period of Classical Chinese lasted 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-present), 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 looked at the frequency of 1st person pronouns in the Academia Sinica Recent Chinese Corpus.

3. The function of *wu2* in Classical Chinese

Wu2 seems to be the default pronoun that appears most frequently, as mentioned above. It occurs pre-verbally in the subject position 85% of the times (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
 wu re xan xing wu shen
 1SG-SUB day three reflect 1SG-POS body
 “I reflect on my behavior three times a day.”³

- (2) 夏 禮 吾_{wu2} 能 言 之
xia li wu nengyan zhi
Xia-PRO rite 1SG-SUB can speak it
杞 不 足 徵 也
qi bu zu zheng ye
Qi-PRO NEG enough reference ye-PART.

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

- (3) 吾_{wu2} 道 一 以 貫 之
wu dao yi yi guan zhi
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.

4. 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} 愛 其 禮
si ye er ai qi yang wo ai qi li
Ci-PRO ye 2SG-SUB love the goat 1SG-SUB love the rite.
“Ci, you love the goat (for sacrifice in the ritual). I love the ritual.”

- (5) 孟孫 問 孝 於 我_{wo3}, 我_{wo3} 對 曰 無 違
Mengswen wen xiao yu wo wo dui yue wu wei
Mengswen ask filial to 1SG-OBJ, 1SG-SUB to say no disobey
“Mengswen asked me about what it is to be 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 ritual. The example can be interpreted as “Contrary to you, *Ci*, I prefer the ritual itself.” In (5), Confucius is telling the disciple *Fanchi* how he answered *Mengswen*’s question about the essence of the notion “filial”. The form *wo3* is thus in contrast with the participant named *Mengswen*.

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

3. We supply pinyin transliterations with the understanding that these may not be the actual pronunciation in Classical Chinese.

- (6) 有 鄙夫 問 於 我wo3, 空 空 如 也
 you bifu wen yu wo kong kong ru ye
 exit farmer ask to 1SG-OBJ empty empty like ye-PART
 “There was a farmer who asked me. I had nothing to teach”

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

- (7) 三 人 行, 必 有 我wo3 師
 san ren xing bi you wo shi
 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 with a contrastive function.⁴ The default pronoun *wu2* is required if the speaker intends to refer to himself non-contrastively:

- (8) 我wo3 不 欲 人 之 加 諸 我wo3 也
 wo bu yu ren zhi jia zhu wo ye
 1SG-SUB NEG want people POS impose onto 1SG-OBJ ye
 吾wu2 亦 欲 無 加 諸 人
 wu yi yu wu jia zhu ren
 1SG-SUB also want nothing impose onto people
 “I don’t want others to impose anything on me. I also don’t want to impose anything on other people.”

- (9) 季氏 使 閔子騫 為 費 宰
 jishi shi minziqian wei fei zai
 Jishi-PRO make/invite Minziqian-PRO become Fei minister
 閔子騫 曰 : 善 為 我wo3 辭 焉。 如 有 復
 Minziqian yue shan wei wo qi yan ru you fu
 Minziqian say nice for 1SG-OBJ reject yan-PART if exist back
 我wo3 者, 則 吾wu2 必 在 汶 上 矣
 wo zhe ze wu bi zai wen shang yi
 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*.

4. 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. Note that there is no punctuation in the original text of the Confucius book. Scholars added this punctuation later on.

5. 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 the *Shang* dynasty (BC1600-BC1066). He found that *yu2* is used exclusively by 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 yue lai yu yu ru
 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 yi tianxia rang shan juan shan juan yue
 Shuen-PRO to nation let good book, good book say
 余 *yu2* 立 於 宇宙 之 中
 yu li yu yuzhou zhi zhong
 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’”

6. 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 Confucius when he quotes the emperor *Wu* (BC1066-BC221) in (12):

- (12) 舜有 臣 五 人 而 天下 治 武 王
 shuen you chen wu ren er tianxia zhi wu wang
 Shuen-PRO have minister five people and nation rule Wu king
 曰: 予 *yu3* 有 亂 臣 十 人
 yue yu you luan chen shi ren
 say 1SG-SUB have mess minister ten people

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

Other examples in *Lunyu*, however, demonstrate that *yu3* indicates a 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 by *Huankui* in a life and death situation. He comforted his disciples by saying that heaven would take care of him no matter what *Huankui* might do to him:

- (13) 子 見 南子, 子路 不 說
 zi jiang nanzi zilü bu yue
 Confucius meet Nanzi-PRO Zilu-PRO NEG happy
 夫子 矢 之 曰: 予_{yu3} 所 否 者, 天 厭 之
 fuzi shi zhi yue yu suo fou zhe tian yan zhi
 Confucius swear it say 1SG-SUB if wrong behavior 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,
 qie yu zong bu de da zang
 and 1SG-SUB though NEG get big funeral
 予_{yu3} 死 於 道 路 乎?
 yu si yu daolu hu
 1SG-SUB die by road WH
 “Though I don’t get a great funeral, would I die beside the road?”

- (15) 子 曰: 天 生 德 於 予_{yu3}
 zi yue tian shen de yu yu
 Confucius say: heaven bore virtue to 1SG-OBJ
 桓 魋 其 如 予_{yu3} 何?
 huankuai qi ru yu he
 Huankuai-PRO he to 1SG-OBJ what
 “Confucius said, ‘Heaven bestowed me with virtue. What could
 Huankui do to me?’”

In all of these 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.

7. The function of the zero pronoun in Classical Chinese

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

- (16) 冉求 曰： 零 pronoun 非 不 說 子 之 道，
 ranqiu yue - fei bu yue zi zhi dao
 Ranqiu-PRO say zero pronoun NEG NEG like Confucius' theory
 zero pronoun 力 不 足 也。子 曰：
 li bu zu ye zi yue
 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
 zi yue wu yu hui yan zhong re bu wei
 Confucius say 1SG-SUB and Hui talk all day NEG against
 如 愚。 零 pronoun 退 而 省 其 私， 亦
 ru yu - tui er xing qi si yi
 as stupid zero pronoun return and reflect its details but
 足 以 發。 回 也 不 愚
 zu yi fa hui ye bu yu
 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 nothing short
 of inspiring. Hui is not stupid.'"

8. 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 himself. Wo3 is used when the speaker contrasts himself 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 his⁵ status in comparison to other concepts in the context. The zero pronoun is used as a complement of verbs of saying in quoted speech by people with lower status and in the subsequent mentions by people with higher status. A summary table is shown below.

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

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	✗	✓	✓

9. The diachronic change of the first singular pronouns

To empirically determine what forms of the first person singular pronouns have been lost, we examined the four pronouns in the corpora of recent Chinese and modern Mandarin. The frequency of occurrence is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Representative frequency of occurrence of the first singular pronouns *wu2*, *wo3*, *yu2*, *yu3*, and the zero pronoun in Classical Chinese, recent Chinese, and modern Mandarin

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

We can see that the form *wu2* is disappearing, *wo3* has become the default first person singular pronoun, *yu2* disappeared completely but then reappeared in modern Mandarin, and zero pronouns seem to have always remained in the language.

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* tokens come from spoken data. *Wu2* occurs only in formal written

5. Only male referents were found in *Lunyu*.

documents that imitate an ancient writing style. All of the 32 examples of *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.

10. 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, the monarchy having been abolished in China in 1911. The function of *yu3* is lost because taboo topics are expressed 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, yet *wo3* was less frequent and more marked? The phonetically similar *wu2* and *wo3* merged. The fact that *wo3* took over the default function follows the behavior of other marked forms that lose their marked nature and become default forms. In new grammaticalization, *wo3* with added stress expresses contrastive focus in modern Mandarin.

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

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