

Understanding the Generalization of the Chinese Address Term “Laoshi” from Prototype Theory

Xinru Jiang, Wei Huangfu

School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China

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Abstract— In recent years, the use of the address term “laoshi” (teacher) has become extremely common in both real-life and online communication. This social address term is no longer synonymous solely with “educator” but carries richer referential meanings. As for the reasons for the generalization of “laoshi”, they extend beyond linguistic factors such as its inherent characteristics and gaps in the Chinese address system, also including social factors like widespread recognition of the teaching profession, alignment with public psychology, and the profound influence of Confucian thought over millennia. Therefore, the term “laoshi” with cognitive fuzziness has important functions in our lives. This research adopts the perspective of cognitive linguistics, applying prototype theory to analyze this cognitive fuzziness and demonstrate that the generalization of “laoshi” positively facilitates communication.

Keywords— *Prototype theory; Cognitive linguistics; Social address term; Laoshi*

I. INTRODUCTION

Address terms are expressions that reflect the identity and role of individuals within specific interpersonal relationships in human society. They mirror relationships within a given socio-cultural or linguistic context, revealing social attributes, values, and close ties to broader cultural, political, traditional, and aesthetic factors, all constrained by specific social systems. The term “laoshi” (teacher) falls into the category of social address terms, characterized by the social relationship of “imparting knowledge and educating students”. Using “laoshi” to address individuals who do not directly perform this role constitutes the generalization of this address term. It is evident that “laoshi” is prevalent not only in education but also widely used in other fields. Linguists have paid

considerable attention to this generalization phenomenon.

Research on the generalization of “laoshi” has started (Huang, 1988), and proliferated with increasingly diverse perspectives. Studies have examined its diachronic development (Wang & Yang, 2005; Tian & Zhang, 2007; Long, 2021), analyzed the sociolinguistic reasons for its generalization (Zha, 2010), and explored regional manifestations in areas like Jinan (Gao & Cui, 2016), Chongqing (Chen, 2020), and Pingdingshan (Xu, 2021). Scholars have also analyzed the phenomenon from pragmatic perspectives (Guo, 2013). Furthermore, comparative studies between “laoshi” (teacher) and “jiaoshi” (teacher) exist (Bai, 2011; Hua, 2010). These studies have deepened understanding and provided new research angles. Given the recent advancements in

cognitive linguistics and the intrinsic link between language generation, comprehension, and cognition, scholars have begun studying the generalization of kinship terms from this perspective (Wu & Han, 2020). This paper will utilize prototype theory and categorization within cognitive linguistics to explore the causes of “laoshi” generalization and its cognitive fuzziness, enriching understanding and promoting its appropriate use in communication.

II. PROTOTYPE THEORY

To understand the world, humans must categorize entities within it. Cognitive linguists Ungerer & Schmid (2001) argue that this psychological process of classification, termed “categorization,” is an interactive process between humans and the objective world, resulting in cognitive categories. The period from Aristotle to Wittgenstein, spanning over two millennia, belonged to the era of classical category theory. This theory held that categories could be defined by a cluster of features or a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. Features were seen as binary, category boundaries as clear-cut, and category membership as equal. Objectivist philosophy was built upon this foundation. However, in the humanities, the classical theory proved less convincing, for instance, while we have “male” and “female,” expressions like “androgynous” or “neutral” exist. Post-Wittgenstein, new understandings emerged, gradually leading to prototype category theory.

Wang Yin (2006) summarizes the core tenets of prototype theory as follows: firstly, a category is a “gestalt” concept formed by features that typically cluster together. These features are not necessary and sufficient conditions for defining the category. Second, categories have a radial structure. Prototypes occupy the core. Basic-level categories are the primary tools humans use to classify surrounding concrete entities and organisms. Third, category boundaries are indeterminate and fuzzy.

Organisms seek maximum information about their environment with minimal expenditure of limited cognitive resources. Categorization reduces cognitive complexity (cognitive economy) but inevitably leads to category fuzziness, a necessary consequence of this economy. Then, category members exhibit varying degrees of membership (graded centrality), possessing family resemblances. Prototypical and non-prototypical members are not equal, and the distinction between them lacks a clear-cut threshold, exhibiting fuzziness. Finally, due to differing socio-cultural constraints on cognition, the perception of category divisions, basic-level categories, and prototypes varies across time, regions, and ethnic groups.

Unlike the classical theory, prototype theory is philosophically grounded in experiential realism, based on human experience and observation of the objective world, offering a fresh perspective on categorization.

III. REASONS FOR THE GENERALIZATION OF THE ADDRESS TERM “LAOSHI”

There are five reasons for the generalization of the address term “laoshi”. First, focus on the word itself, it has intrinsic characteristics: one is elegant connotation, another is political distance. About elegant connotation: “laoshi” inherently carries connotations of mentorship, knowledge, and cultivation, giving it an elegant, refined aura. It possesses positive affective meaning. About political distance: Since the 1980s, as societal focus shifted from politics to economics, values changed, fostering a tendency towards political distance. “laoshi” avoids the excessive formality or seriousness of terms like “comrade” (tongzhi) and lacks their political overtones. This made “laoshi” a natural replacement for such terms (e.g., addressing scholar Feng Youlan as “Feng Youlan laoshi”). These intrinsic features “elegance and political distance” are fundamental reasons for its generalization.

Second, about the historical and cultural factors, China has a long tradition of “respecting teachers and valuing education” (zun shi zhong dao). As knowledge transmitters, teachers (“shi”) naturally commanded respect from students (“sheng”). Historically, except during specific periods, teachers held high social status, commanding respect and awe. This tradition elevated those imparting knowledge or skills above other professions. Consequently, anyone possessing superior knowledge, ability, or experience in any field tends to be respected.

Third, it is because the socio-economic development. Social progress abolished rigid hierarchies, establishing equality among professions. In this context, “laoshi” gained new meaning. As education became increasingly valued, the role of teachers as guides in both knowledge and character development became paramount. Teachers garnered exceptional respect, reflecting societal recognition of their labor and dedication. Beyond education, booming industries like film, media, and healthcare required experienced individuals to train newcomers. Senior figures in these fields fulfilled educational and guiding roles akin to teachers, leading to the widespread adoption of “laoshi” (e.g., host He Jiong being called “He Laoshi”). This phenomenon is intertwined with socio-cultural development.

Then, the gap in the Chinese address system, which means economic transition and social change created new social strata and professions, expanding social roles and communicative circles. When interacting with acquaintances or strangers outside kinship relations, appropriate address terms are sometimes lacking. Using “laoshi” as a polite, vague term to fill these gaps is a convenient and tactful solution. The absence of suitable address terms is thus a key factor in the generalization of “laoshi” (e.g., addressing administrative, library, or accounting staff in schools; using “laoshi” for bus drivers or chefs in Shandong dialect).

Finally, about public psychological factors, language

is a communicative tool, and users' psychological factors heavily influence word choice. For instance, hairdressers might be addressed as “Little X Laoshi”; using “Little X” alone might seem disrespectful, while “Stylist Little X” sounds unnatural. The cultural inclination towards respect makes “laoshi” a psychologically acceptable address term.

In a word, the generalization of “laoshi” results from the interplay of these factors, bringing convenience to daily communication. However, it is not universally applicable. Whether in its narrow or broad sense, “laoshi” typically refers to respected individuals with certain cultural attainment and refinement. Understanding its cognitive fuzziness and limitations is crucial for its appropriate use; otherwise, it risks losing its original vitality and appeal.

IV. COGNITIVE FUZZINESS OF “LAOSHI” AND ITS FUNCTION

Historically, “laoshi” first appeared in the Zuo Commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals (“Lao shi fei cai, yi wu yi ye” (“Aging teachers exhausting resources is also useless”)). Here, “lao shi” were two separate words: “lao” meaning aged senior, “shi” meaning knowledge transmitter. Its use as a specific honorific began in the Tang Dynasty, initially for Buddhist monks. The respectful prefix “lao-” became customary, and “shi” stood in contrast to “sheng” (student), solidifying “laoshi” as a distinct address. Later, it referred to masters of manual crafts. By the Jin Dynasty, it acquired a meaning closer to today's “educator.” During the Ming and Qing dynasties, it became a term used by students to honor their examiners. By then, “lao-” had become a true prefix, losing its meaning of old age and retaining only connotations of virtue and erudition. From the late Qing to the early 20th century, it evolved into a general honorific for teachers. For a long period in the early 20th century, “xiansheng” (Mr./Sir) largely replaced it. After the founding of the PRC, “laoshi” regained ground, replacing “xiansheng” in

primary and secondary schools. Today, its usage is increasingly frequent and widespread, evolving from specifically denoting educators to becoming a general term of respect.

According to prototype theory, the core prototype of the “laoshi” category is “one who imparts knowledge and educates students.” We judge whether to address someone as “laoshi” by comparing their occupational characteristics to this prototype. For instance, a piano “laoshi” or guitar “laoshi” imparts “skills” rather than strictly “knowledge,” but due to high family resemblance within the category, the address is appropriate. In other service industries like healthcare (doctors, nurses), whose core function is “treating/caring for patients,” the resemblance to “imparting knowledge” is low. Thus, in a hospital, “daifu” (doctor) or “Dr. X” better conveys respect and aligns with professional and institutional characteristics. Similarly, using “laoshi” for bus drivers (Shandong dialect) or strangers when asking directions is acceptable because the driver “provides a service” and the stranger “provides help,” actions bearing resemblance to “imparting knowledge.” However, outsiders might find this confusing due to lower resemblance to the prototype. Effective communication in such regions requires understanding and mastering this localized usage.

Simultaneously, “laoshi” exhibits cognitive fuzziness. The boundaries of the “laoshi” category are blurred; modern Chinese dictionaries lack precise criteria for membership. Furthermore, societal development drives cognitive shifts, leading to corresponding changes in address terms. Perfectly “correct” usage is unattainable. Examples include hairdressers calling themselves “XX Laoshi,” netizens addressing bloggers as “X Laoshi,” or close friends using “X Laoshi.” Individual cognitive variations regarding “laoshi” result in differing usage. Because “laoshi” primarily conveys respect and has strong positive connotations, effectively embodying the cognitive feature of “respected person,” its generalized use faces

minimal constraints and generally facilitates positive communication.

V. CONCLUSION

Language, particularly address terms, though presented as words or characters, involves complex underlying cognitive processes reflecting the speaker's experiences, conceptual identifications, and thought patterns, making it highly valuable for research. Address terms serve crucial socio-cultural marking functions, identifying the identity, status, and relationship between communicators. Compared to kinship terms, social address terms appear more subjective, but their evolution is not entirely arbitrary; it is closely tied to societal development and human cognition. We cannot arbitrarily deny their legitimacy. The evolution of “laoshi” from a specific referent to a generalized term for individuals with certain characteristics follows human cognitive patterns and embodies linguistic economy. Humans constantly integrate new knowledge into existing frameworks: an efficient learning strategy.

Therefore, we should neither rigidly regulate nor suppress the generalization of “laoshi”. Instead, based on a thorough examination of its evolution and user adaptation and acceptance, appropriate guidance should be provided. We should neither pessimistically assume its generalization will inevitably follow the paths of terms like “xiaojie” (Miss) or “tongzhi” (comrade), nor allow uncontrolled expansion. Only then can the use of “laoshi” become more user-friendly and aligned with linguistic reality. As the generalization of “laoshi” results from multiple linguistic and social factors, a comprehensive and objective understanding requires integrating perspectives beyond cognitive linguistics.

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