

# *Study on the Generalization of Chinese Address Terms "X+Teacher"*

Shishun Tian

*The College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, 610207, China*

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**Abstract:** Address terms evolve continuously according to actual usage needs, and the generalization of address terms refers to the relaxation or removal of the restriction on the referents of a particular address term. This paper focuses on the phenomenon of college students using "teacher" to address non-teacher groups. Firstly, it analyzes the semantic evolution process of the Chinese address term "teacher" and points out that the occupational identity of "teacher" can be blurred under certain conditions, allowing "X+teacher" to be used to address non-teacher groups. Secondly, it explores the significant factors influencing the emergence of the generalized meaning of the Chinese address term "X+teacher" based on survey results. Finally, combining relevant linguistic theories, it elucidates the reasons for the emergence of the generalized meaning of the Chinese address term "X+teacher" from both external and internal linguistic perspectives.

## 1. Introduction

Address terms refer to "the names representing various social relations among people and the social roles they play"[1]. As an important linguistic material reflecting the co-variation phenomenon between language and society, address terms authentically reflect interpersonal relationships, values, social customs, and the zeitgeist of discourse interaction. Therefore, address terms not only serve the function of referring to things like general language symbols but are also important "specimens" in the study of social language. Research on the generalization of Chinese address terms has mainly focused on exploring the categories, usage, and some pragmatic functions of kinship address terms and social address terms after generalization, or has started from a new constructed address term to investigate its lexical composition and analogical meaning after generalization. In addition, previous studies on address terms have mostly adopted a static perspective, either focusing on exploring the internal rules of the address term ontology system or excessively emphasizing the restrictive role of traditional culture and social structure on speakers, lacking a dynamic, in-depth examination of the variation phenomena of address terms caused by objective factors (such as the social status of both parties and the communication context) and the influence of the speakers' subjective consciousness, as well as how the communicators regulate and negotiate interpersonal relationships through address terms and construct corresponding social identities and group identities.

With the development of the times, the usage of many address terms has changed. College

students, as a new force that interacts most frequently and directly with multimedia and internet communication, to some extent, can most directly reflect the situation of social linguistic changes through their language use. Traditional notions hold that "teacher" mainly refers to individuals with teaching professions or generally refers to people who impart knowledge, experience, and skills. However, nowadays, people (especially young groups like college students) increasingly use "teacher" to address non-teacher groups (such as peers) in daily communication, and this usage may even carry humorous or teasing semantic nuances. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore the characteristics and reasons for the generalization of modern Chinese social address terms using this phenomenon as an example.

## 2. Semantic Evolution of "Teacher"

Language is in constant development and change. The term "teacher" has undergone development and evolution from ancient times to the present.

Let's first look at the term "teacher" in ancient Chinese. Starting with the characters, "lao" is a compound ideogram, originally meaning old age or aging. In the "Shuowen Jiezi - Lao Bu," it is explained: "lao, to examine. Seventy is called old. It consists of the radicals for person, hair, and spoon. It means the hair has turned white. All characters related to 'old' are derived from 'lao.'" On the other hand[2], "shi" is also a compound ideogram, originally referring to ancient armies. In the "Shuowen Jiezi - Shi Bu," it is stated: "Two thousand five hundred people form a regiment. It consists of the radicals for regiment and multitude.[3]" The term "teacher" first appeared in phrases like "Teachers cost money, but also useless" ("Expeditions are costly and useless," from "Zuo Zhuan - Duke Xi Thirty-three"), referring to the prolonged time spent by the army on expeditions, with a semantic difference from the modern Chinese meaning of "teacher." However, in "Shiji - Biographies of Mencius and Xun Qing," it is mentioned that "All of Tian Pian's associates had died, and during the time of King Xiang of Qi, Xun Qing became the most esteemed teacher," meaning that after the death of Tian Pian's associates, Xun Qing became the most esteemed "teacher." Here, "teacher" is used as an evaluative adjective, indicating a connection to the modern Chinese meaning of "teacher."

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the term "teacher" had different uses in Confucian and foreign religious literature. In Confucian texts, "teacher" often appeared alongside great Confucian scholars, such as in Han Yu's "Inscription on Mr. Shi's Tomb" from the Tang Dynasty, where it says, "Even the virtuous, great officials, teachers, and aged scholars shed tears and offered condolences upon hearing of Mr. Shi's death." Similarly, in Ouyang Xiu's "Inquiry into the Strategies for the Advanced Scholars" from the Song Dynasty, it mentions, "Since the burning of books in the Qin dynasty, the Six Classics were lost. During the Han dynasty, they were rediscovered, but they were all incomplete, distorted, or passed down through confused teachers, or obtained from tombs and between walls." In these texts, "teacher" refers to esteemed, elderly individuals who impart knowledge, and it often appears as a phrase, though it has not yet fully developed into a compound word for addressing specific groups. Meanwhile, during the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism spread to the central plains, resulting in a large number of Buddhist writings. Unlike Confucian classics, these texts were a blend of prose and verse, and in Buddhist scriptures, "teacher" became a term of respect for monks who imparted the secrets of Buddhist scriptures.

In the Five Dynasties period, "teacher" became a specific term for people who taught manual skills. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, the term "teacher" became a respectful title for students to address their seated masters. According to Wang Shizhen's "Record of Pottery," from the Ming Dynasty, it is recorded, "Upon reaching the level of magistrate, flatterers are called old men, and those who flatter excessively are called teachers. Since then, students have called their seated

masters 'teachers.'" The seated masters were the court officials in charge of examinations in the imperial examination system, who did not engage in the transmission of knowledge, experience, or skills. During this period, "teacher" became a term to describe a specific position.

The term "teacher" has undergone semantic filtering, absorption, and refinement from ancient to modern Chinese, and its semantic changes reflect the process of its generalization as an address term. In modern Chinese, "teacher" retains its main meaning of a person who imparts knowledge. According to the "Modern Chinese Dictionary" (6th edition), the definition of "teacher" is as follows:

[teacher] noun. An honorific for teachers, broadly referring to people who impart culture, technology, or those worth learning from[4].

From the perspective of semantic analysis, in modern Chinese, "teacher" as a derivative word in a compound word, the meaning of the prefix "lao" is weakened or even dropped. Therefore, in the appellation "teacher," the actual meaning is carried by the root word "shi." Thus, in modern Chinese, the basic meaning of "teacher" is to address someone who possesses cultural and technical knowledge worth learning from, with the basic semantic elements being [ $\pm$  elderly], [ $\pm$  teaching profession], [ $\pm$  cultural and technical knowledge], and [ $\pm$  strengths]. However, language evolves continuously with changes in society. Influenced by changes in public quality and ideological concepts, "teacher" can now, in certain situations, transcend professional limitations and even the boundaries of possessing cultural and technical knowledge. That is to say, in certain situations, the semantic features of "teacher" are weakened or even dropped, mainly manifested in the weakening of the teaching profession attribute, the fading of age order, and the blurring of experienced strengths. Therefore, "X+teacher" has become a generalized appellation used to show a respectful attitude or mutual teasing between peers.

Thus, with the semantic changes of the term "teacher," its referents as an address term have also transcended the original boundaries, resulting in generalization phenomena. As a generalized address term, its semantic features essentially exhibit a certain degree of openness and semantic ambiguity. The group referred to by the term "teacher" continuously expands due to this semantic openness, and from the historical semantic evolution process of the term "teacher," we can also see the process of its specific meanings becoming blurred. The openness and ambiguity of semantics of address terms interact with each other: the generalization of address terms leads to semantic ambiguity and expansion, and at the same time, the openness and ambiguity of semantics consolidate the generalization of address terms.

### 3. Novel Developments in the Generalization of the "X+Teacher" Appellation

While the phenomenon of the generalization of the "X+teacher" appellation has existed for a long time, in recent years, there have been some novel uses of this appellation within the college student community. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the usage patterns and characteristics of college students regarding the generalized use of the "X+teacher" appellation, and to trace the underlying causes in relation to their social reality and language usage intentions, the author conducted a survey. Within the college student community, the phenomenon of the generalized use of the "X+teacher" appellation is prevalent across different genders, age groups, educational backgrounds, and majors, confirming previous research suggesting that the degree of generalization of the social appellation "teacher" is already quite high. However, our survey also revealed several new developments:

1) Regarding social settings, the predominant use of the "X+teacher" appellation to address individuals within the campus has expanded to also include addressing individuals outside the campus using the same appellation, with the frequency of use in both situations being similar.

Through further interviews with respondents, we discovered that even outside the campus, college students tend to use the same appellations commonly used on campus to address individuals in society. Additionally, in some companies where there are many interns, mutual addressing as "teacher" or "classmate" has become a new emerging corporate culture and atmosphere, representing an expansion of their social settings.

2) Concerning the status and advantages of both parties, the primary use of the "X+teacher" appellation to address individuals of higher status or those with advantageous skills has evolved to also include addressing individuals with similar status, with the frequency of use in both situations being very close. Similarly, interviews with selected respondents revealed that modern college students are gradually weakening the concept of status. They tend to view individuals as equal in personality and believe that most people have something worth learning from.

3) In terms of usage purposes, whereas previously "teacher" primarily served as a form of respectful address, it has now evolved to serve new purposes. For instance, when seeking assistance from someone, addressing them as "teacher" demonstrates a humble attitude, making it easier to achieve one's goals. Furthermore, a semantic of jest or banter has emerged. Through interviews with this subset of respondents, we found that this new usage often occurs between familiar peers as a playful term used to tease one another.

In conclusion, the semantic scope of "X+teacher" has been extended and generalized in the usage of contemporary college students. Most college students are familiar with and understand the phenomenon of using "X+teacher" to address non-teacher groups, and this usage has been accepted and adopted by the majority. Moreover, as a pragmatic phenomenon, the expanded meaning of "X+teacher" is closely related to specific communication contexts, the social relationship between the parties involved, and the communicative intentions.

#### **4. Explanation of the Reasons for the Generalization Phenomenon of the "Teacher" Appellation**

The variation in language phenomena is the product of multiple factors. Therefore, to explore the reasons for the generalization of the "X+teacher" appellation, we can investigate from both internal and external perspectives of language.

##### **4.1 Internal Reasons of Language**

###### **4.1.1 Arbitrariness and Metaphorical Semantic Generalization of Language Symbols**

Language symbols are conventional, and the generalization of the "teacher" appellation is closely related to this basic property of language symbols. The combination of "lao" and "shi" from two independent morphemes to a fixed appellation used frequently involves the arbitrariness of phonetics and semantics. With social development and change, the original signifier and signified relationship loosens, expanding the range of signifiers, establishing new associations with other signifiers, and giving rise to new meanings, which is an important premise for conceptual metaphor. From a semantic perspective, the expansion of the referent of "X+teacher" cannot be separated from the semantic generalization brought about by metaphor. Semantic generalization refers to "words continuously generating new usage modes while retaining fewer and fewer original semantic features, incorporating more and more objects into their referential scope." [5] The widespread use of "teacher" as a common form of address in contemporary social interactions demonstrates its strong openness and inclusiveness in semantics. People use metaphor in the process of using "teacher," making a common analogy between a certain group and the original "teacher," thereby addressing non-teacher groups as "teacher." As seen from the previous survey results, individuals

with higher status and advantageous skills are more likely to be referred to as "X+teacher" in the eyes of the vast majority of respondents. However, it can be observed that the role of metaphor has gradually diminished, but it remains an important linguistic clue for analyzing this phenomenon. Therefore, while deviating from its basic meaning, "X+teacher" also creatively associates with other referents as much as possible. The generalized usage of "X+teacher" gradually reconciles and develops within the college student community, expanding its semantic scope step by step and establishing and disseminating new meanings.

#### **4.1.2 Principles of Chinese Appellations**

Chinese appellations follow the principles of equidistance and emotion. "Teacher" is a relatively moderate appellation in terms of both equidistance and emotion. Compared to appellations related to job levels (such as bureau chief, leader, etc.), the hierarchical differences of "teacher" are weakened, while compared to appellations of the same kinship (such as aunt, uncle, elder brother, elder sister, etc.), "teacher" does not appear overly affectionate, retaining a sense of boundaries in interpersonal communication. The generalization of the "teacher" appellation mediates the contradiction between equidistance and emotional distance to some extent. In daily communication, addressing someone as "teacher" elevates their social status, showing politeness and respect, while also maintaining a moderate interpersonal distance, facilitating proper communication between the parties involved and promoting smooth communication activities.

#### **4.1.3. Subjectification of Language**

Additionally, we can use the concept of "subjectification of language" to understand the generalization of the "teacher" appellation. The subjectification of language refers to "the use of corresponding structural forms or undergoing corresponding evolutionary processes to express (the user's) subjectivity [6]." Language always carries more or less the subjective intent of the speaker in the process of communication. As an important component of language that serves the function of reference, appellations can also reflect the subjective attitudes that the speaker wants to express. The new manifestations of the generalized "X+teacher" among college student groups, such as using it for jest or banter, or seeking help from others, precisely reflect that under new social circumstances, people, influenced by subjective intent, use specific expressions to achieve the purpose of discourse communication.

### **4.2 External Reasons of Language**

#### **4.2.1 Historical and Cultural Factors of Respecting Teachers and Valuing Ethics**

China has been influenced by Confucianism since ancient times, emphasizing "respecting teachers and valuing ethics." As holders and disseminators of knowledge, teachers have long been positioned in the upper echelons of society due to their outstanding abilities and high moral standards, receiving respect and reverence from all sectors of society. This is a tradition in China with rich historical and cultural connotations. Therefore, anyone who excels in certain aspects (such as knowledge, abilities, experience, etc.) tends to be universally recognized and respected by others in society, providing a fundamental background for the generalization of the appellation "teacher."

#### **4.2.2 Social Change and the Reconstruction of Language Identity**

Language is closely related to society, and the trend of evolution in modern Chinese appellations reflects the interaction between language and social change. Firstly, from a macro perspective, with

the popularization of education and social development, people's quality, especially among college student groups, has significantly improved, and they have become more tolerant and open-minded towards novel things and phenomena. Moreover, the enrichment of social forms has enhanced people's social concepts and desires, laying the foundation for the semantic generalization of "teacher." Secondly, through a micro-perspective examination, the reconstruction of language identity in discourse communication is also an important reason for the generalization of the "X+teacher" appellation. Language identity is constructed under the influence of society, with fluidity, temporality, and complexity. It is sensitive to the communication environment and is a dynamic linguistic parameter. In the process of communication, the language identity adopted is jointly determined by specific contexts and social culture. Therefore, in the context of social ideological change, the appellation of "teacher" is no longer limited to various semantic restrictions, breaking through the original occupational attribute constraints and forming a new type of language identity with transgressive characteristics. From this perspective, "X+teacher" serves as a specific language identity that can regulate communication efficiency. Through the reconstruction of language identity, people break free from the constraints of using conventional appellations to achieve more ideal communication results.

#### 4.2.3 Assimilative Role of Social Groups

In his book "Course in General Linguistics," Ferdinand de Saussure mentioned, "All changes germinate in speech. Before becoming generally adopted, any change is initiated by several individuals... This process repeats itself, and when it is accepted by society, it becomes a linguistic fact." The social attribute of individuals, namely their conformity mentality, drives them to actively or passively align with the majority of society. This characteristic is reflected in language through the expression of identity and orientation. In daily communication, people not only need to understand others' words but also need to express themselves in a way that is acceptable to others. Therefore, speakers need to use language forms that are accepted by the entire speech community for expression. Hence, when some individuals within the college student group begin using the generalized appellation "X+teacher," other members are also influenced imperceptibly, leading to corresponding changes, gradually popularizing this linguistic phenomenon and embarking on the path of generalization.

### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the development and changes in language are inseparable from society, and societal transformations are also driven by language, forming a symbiotic and complementary relationship. Although the generalization of "teacher" from a specific appellation to a non-specific one has been observed by scholars in earlier years, this article, through an investigation into the usage of "X+teacher" appellation among contemporary college students, reveals that the generalization of the "teacher" appellation continues in today's society and has new trends. For example, it can now refer to people of similar social status and even be used humorously. As the most avant-garde group in society, the language usage habits of college students to some extent will influence the entire society, injecting continuous vitality into the modern Chinese language system. At the same time, we can also see that the Chinese appellative system is continuously evolving in response to societal communication needs. It is crucial for us to closely monitor the relationship between language and society, grasp the trends and patterns of its development.

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