

# Sociolinguistic Study on the Address Term “Meinü” in Present-day China

## ETUDE PRAGMATIQUE DU MOT D’APPELLATION CHINOIS « BELLE »

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, “meinü” (‘beautiful ladies’) has become a popular address term to females in China. It is no longer a privilege term used to refer to beautiful young ladies, but a pan-honorific term for the females. Based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches, this study examines the usage of address term “meinü” across four cities by analyzing their sociolinguistic functions in communication. The information about the addresser and the addressee, such as age and gender, as well as information about the relationship between the interlocutors, such as degree of intimacy, or level of solidarity are also studied.

**Key words:** address term, meinü, sociolinguistic function

**Résumé:** De nos jours, le mot « belle », appellation des femmes, est très populaire en Chine. Le mot « belle », n’étant plus réservé aux femmes jeunes et jolies, devient une appellation polie pour toutes les femmes. Le présent article, en combinant la méthode quantitative et la méthode qualitative de recherche, examine profondément l’utilisation de ce mot dans 4 villes chinoises et sa fonction pragmatique dans la communication. L’auteur étudie aussi des informations sur le locuteur et l’interlocuteur, telles que le sexe, l’âge, leur relation, etc.

**Mots-Clés:** mot d’appellation, belle, fonction pragmatique

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, “meinü” (美女, ‘beautiful ladies’) is a popular address term to female in our daily life. A great number of women have been addressed as “meinü” regardless of their appearance, age, occupation, and so on. Therefore the word “meinü” is no longer a privilege term used to refer to beautiful young ladies, but a pan-honorific term for the females. Li (2001: 68) has pointed out “terms of address can reflect a society’s norms and values”. It is true that the address terms for females are changing over time, partly due to the reason that women play an increasingly important role in the modern society. With the development of economy, more and more women begin to participate in the social work and their address terms are changing with their social positions.

In the last half period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the address

term “tongzhi” (同志, ‘comrade’) was used most frequently in language communication on mainland China. It was feasible to address nearly every person “tongzhi”, indiscriminate in gender. However, this most widely used term in the pre-reform era has become obsolete though it is still used in the political discourse and has been replaced by terms that are modern and gender-specific, for instance, “xiansheng” (先生, ‘Mr.’) and “xiaojie” (小姐, ‘Miss’). So for a period of time, the address terms “xiansheng” and “xiaojie” were quite popular. “Xiansheng” is still used now, however, “xiaojie” is a sensitive address term because it’s also an euphemism for prostitutes due to the emergence of the pornography industry. Therefore, sometimes people find it difficult to address the young females. As a result, the address term “meinü” has been invented to replace “xiaojie”. So the aim of this paper is to examine the usage of this newly emerged address term “meinü”, as well as its variants “liangnü” (靓女, ‘beautiful ladies’), by analyzing their sociolinguistic functions in

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\* Received 6 August 2007; accepted 5 October 2007

communication, and geographic distribution in China as well. The information about the addresser and the addressee, such as age and gender, as well as information about the relationship between the interlocutors, such as degree of intimacy, or level of solidarity are also studied.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the use of address terms in the past four decades, beginning with the classic study of Brown and Gilman (1960), has focused on the social dimensions of address terms, primarily, on issues of solidarity, power, and formality. For example, Lin (1992) explores how social-psychological factors of closeness and distance govern the speaker's selection of address terms. Takiff, Sanchez and Stewart (2000) conduct a study on the students' terms of address for male and female professors. Professors were perceived to hold higher status when addressed by title regardless of their gender. The result of this study showed that the probability of being addressed by title was significantly greater for male professors than female professors, suggesting that female professors hold lower status than male professors. The recent study Afull (2007) investigates one particular form of address terms, descriptive phrases in the academic settings, finding that these address terms were conditioned by context of situation and socio-cultural indices such as solidarity, gender, age as well as pragmatic factors. In addition, many studies on address terms in contexts of social-political changes tend to examine change in address terms as caused by and reflecting societal changes.

Research on address terms in Chinese has taken a similar approach. Fang and Heng (1983) examine the changing address norms in China since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949. In his research, the term "tongzhi", "xiansheng", "taitai" (太太, 'Mrs.') and "xiaojie" are discussed. In particular, there are many researches focusing on the investigation of one term in detail. For example, Hu and Hu (2000) study the semantic function and pragmatic constraints of the address term "tongzhi". Chen (2005) offers a detailed study on the address term "xiansheng", including its historical development of meaning, degree of social recognition and utilization, and the relationship of this address term with the interlocutors' geographic location, gender, education, occupation, economic status and other address terms. In addition, many researches have heated discussions on the address term "xiaojie" (Fan et al., 2004; Xu & Li, 2007; Li, 2001). Some of them hold that the term "xiaojie" will go out of use because of its negative connotation, but some of them argue that it will continue its popularity because of its honorific nature. However, there are few researches done on the address term "meinü", due to its novelty. The article written by Wang (2006) on the address term "meinü" points out

that it is suitable for referring to young females, but disrespectful to referring to the old. He (2006) reveals the generalization of this address term from three aspects, relationship of the interlocutors from intimates to strangers, appearance of the addressees from beautiful looking to plain looking, age of the addressees from young to not young. Liu (2007) interprets the pragmatic functions of "meinü" from speech acts theory, relevance theory and politeness principle, pointing out that this address term is characterized by vividly dynamic contexts and how this term does things with words and avoids pragmatic errors. Nevertheless, none of them is empirical studies. Obviously, the study on this topic is not sufficient. Therefore, the present empirical research is trying to fill this gap by investigating the use of the address term "meinü" across four cities in China.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of the present study is based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Firstly, a survey was conducted in the form of questionnaire (See Appendix 1) concerning the use "meinü" among different people in the four cities of China, namely, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Chengdu. Secondly, an in-depth interview (See Appendix 2) was carried out among the respondents to the questionnaire in Beijing on a random basis. A third source of information was participant observation. I was involved in a variety of social situations, formal and informal, to observe the utilizing of the address term "meinü". The first approach is mainly quantitative, while the second and the third approaches are qualitative.

In consideration to the aim of the study and the design of the questionnaire, the following five research questions are proposed.

RQ1: What does the word "meinü" firstly refer to in the cities?

RQ2: Are there any geographical or gender differences in the use of this address term?

RQ3: What are intimacy relationships between the addresser and addressee?

RQ4: What are situations in which the address term "meinü" is mostly used?

RQ5: What are the sociolinguistic functions of this address term?

### 3.1 Subjects

Address terms may vary according to the geographical locations of the cities in China. Considering this factor, the subjects were selected from four cities distributed in

the four parts of China. The cities chosen are Beijing in the north, Guangzhou in the south, Shanghai in the east, and Chengdu in the west. They are all metropolises with similar level of development. In each city 30 subjects (15 male and 15 female) were randomly selected ranging from age 20 to 30 to complete the questionnaire. The variable of age is controlled for the following reason. Since the address term “meinü” is newly coined, and its usage may be accepted more quickly by the young people, therefore, the range of age is confined between 20 and 30. Before filling the questionnaire, the subject’ age was asked. If he or she fitted requirement, then the questionnaire was distributed to him or her.

### 3.2 Data collection

#### 3.2.1 Questionnaire design

There are both multiple choices and an open question in the questionnaire (See Appendix 1). A pilot study was conducted before the main one. Questionnaires were given to 5 subjects (3 females and 2 males) in Beijing Foreign Studies University to finish. After the completion, they were encouraged to ask questions and give suggestions on the clarity of the instruction and the designed questions in the questionnaire. The questionnaire used for the present study is the modified version after revision. It is mainly for collecting data on the first four research questions.

#### 3.2.2 Questionnaires data collection

Due to the different locations of the cities, the questionnaires are only collected in Beijing by myself. The questionnaires in the other three cities were collected with the help of my friends in the cities, as the research assistants. I sent them the electronic version of the questionnaire and told them the points for attention in data collection, such as age restriction, gender selection, instructions to the subjects and how to answer their questions and so on. There were mainly two ways for the questionnaires collecting, one on the street and the other on the internet. The three assistants in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Chengdu respectively and I in Beijing distributed the questionnaires on street to passersby that are appropriate to be the subjects of the study. The chosen subjects were cooperative and voluntarily filled the form. We also distributed the questionnaires through QQ (a popular internet chatting and information transmitting software) to the friends, acquaintances we know and asked them to send the questionnaire back after completion.

Altogether 125 questionnaires were collected from the four cities. Among them, 5 questionnaires are invalid due to the incompleteness of the necessary information about the age or gender. The rest 120 valid questionnaires are evenly distributed in the four cities, i.e. 30 sheets in each city.

#### 3.2.3 Complementary data collection

Besides questionnaires, the methods of in-depth interview and participant observation were also employed in the present study.

The in-depth interviews were conducted on 10 respondents to questionnaires among the 30 subjects in Beijing randomly. I asked them questions on the written interview (See Appendix 2) and noted down their answers immediately. The data gathered in this part is to answer the fifth research question, the major sociolinguistic functions of the address term “meinü”.

As to participant observation, the author observed the usage of the address term “meinü” in daily life consciously and noted down the sites and situations when heard the term. Detailed information about this will be provided in the data analysis section.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

All the data collected from the questionnaires, the participant observation, and written interview are analyzed in regard to the research questions.

### 4.1 First reference of “meinü” and its geographical differences

Collecting the information in the questionnaires, the word “meinü” firstly refers to an address term in the opinions of many subjects. The answer is calculated and summarized into the following table.

**Table 1 The First Reference of “Meinü” in the Four Cities**

Choices Cities	A as the first reference (%)	B as the first reference (%)	C as the first reference (%)
Beijing	27	60	13
Guangzhou	0	100	0
Shanghai	6	90	4
Chengdu	9	82	9

A refers to a beautiful woman; B refers to a common address term; C refers to a complimentary remark (See Appendix 1)

The table shows that the majority of the first reference of “meinü” in the four cities is all a common address term. This finding suggests that “meinü” is no longer a common word, but an address term now. One outstanding characteristic of the table is that all the subjects in the city of Guangzhou use “meinü” as an address term, which demonstrates that this term is quite popular there. The first reference of “meinü” as an address term in Shanghai is also popular. The reason

may lie in that these coastal cities are fast developing and quite open to new things, including the new address term. However, it needs to be pointed out that people in Guangzhou usually use the variant “liangnü” instead of “meinü” to address young females. This is different from the other three cities. The first reference of “meinü” as an address term in Chengdu ranks the third after Shanghai. Though Chengdu is a western inland city, and the scale of economy is not as large as that of the other cities, this address term is also popular there. The saying that “Many beauties were born in Chengdu” (自古成都出美女) may account for the popularity of this address term in the city. The first reference of “meinü” as an address term in Beijing ranks last among

the four cities. The degree of formality and situations’ restriction of this term influence its utilization in the capital city Beijing, revealing that Beijing is not as open as that of the coastal cities, such as Guangzhou and Shanghai.

#### 4.2 Gender differences

The popular use of “meinü” as an address term is also reflected in the high frequency of the subjects’ experience of addressing others and being addressed as “meinü”. See the following table.

**Table 2 Experience of addressing others and being addressed as “meinü”**

Category Cities	Experience of addressing others as “meinü”		Experience of being addressed as “meinü”
	Male	Female	Female
Beijing	14	11	14
Guangzhou	15	15	15
Shanghai	14	12	15
Chengdu	15	13	15
Total	58	51	59

This table reveals that 109 out 120 of the subjects have the experience of addressing others as “meinü” and 60 but 1 female subjects have the experience of being addressed as “meinü”, which suggest the wide use of this term among the young people, male or female. However, when addressing others, males are more inclined to use the term “meinü” than females. The gender difference lies in that “meinü” is female-specific term and therefore constantly employed by the opposite gender. This signals the male addressers’ conscious initiatives to compliment females or to negotiate interpersonal relationships. There are not significant differences among the four cities concerning the experience frequency of addressing other or being addressed as “meinü”.

Though “meinü” is widely used as an address term, not all the subjects (males and females) are accustomed to addressing others as “meinü” (See Table 3). Only 27% of the subjects in Beijing are accustomed to addressing females as “meinü”. The proportion in Guangzhou is 33%, Shanghai 33% and Chengdu 30%. Look at the figures from the gender division, it can be clearly found that the total proportion of male accustomed to the term is high than that of female. This finding is consistent with the experience using this term, indicating that males use “meinü” more frequent than females. About half of the subjects in the four cities use it in terms of the situations. And about 20% of the subjects are not accustomed using it as an address term.

**Table 3 Proportion of Subjects Accustomed to Addressing Females as “Meinü”**

	Males (%)	Females (%)	Total (%)
Beijing	17%	10%	27%
Guangzhou	20%	13%	33%
Shanghai	20%	13%	33%
Chengdu	17%	13%	30%
Average	18.5%	12.25%	30.75%

As to the 60 female subjects, 16% of them are not accustomed to be addressed as “meinü”. The finding reflects that the appropriateness of the address term have to be considered in different situations, and “meinü” is not applicable everywhere. As a result, people need to be careful in the choice of the address term for the purpose of comfortable communication.

#### 4.3 Intimacy relationship between the interlocutors

As to the degree of intimacy between the interlocutors, the data from the questionnaire shows that the 31% of the subjects use the address term “meinü” between intimates, 50% of the subjects use it between the acquaintances, and only 6% use it between strangers. The result conveys the message that this address term is very active between the persons that are familiar with each other but not active between those who are not familiar. The reasons are simple. First, the term is complimentary in nature and it is a good social strategy.

It is known that all the girls like to be praised for their good looking appearance. So this term satisfies the girls' need of being praised and addressed at the same time. Therefore, it is helpful to enhance the relationship between the familiars. For example, one friend greeted another "Hi, beauty! When did you buy this new dress? You look terrific in it." The addressee was very happy to hear that, because both she and her dress were praised. By contrast, strangers seldom have the opportunity to meet each other again, and the necessity to compliment is greatly reduced. Second, the degree of formality of this address term determines the scope of its utilization. "Meinü" is often used between intimate friends and acquaintances due to its informality and liveliness. The address term "meinü" came into use firstly on the internet chatting. The net chatters use it because it is fashionable, appealing to the ears, and informal as well. In addition, the strangers are not clear about the ages of each other. If this address term is used, the addressees that are sensitive to the age may get annoyed. If it is used to address people that are not good looking, they may feel offended.

Concerning the age problem, according to the questionnaire investigation, half of the subjects are accustomed to address females between 21 and 25 as "meinü". This is because more than half of the subjects fall in the age group of 21 to 25, and they are likely to use this term among their peers. However, 40% of the subjects think there is no age restriction on the application of this term. This finding demonstrates the generalization of "meinü" from referring to young beautiful females in particular to a pan-honorific term for females in general. With the frequent communication of Eastern and Western culture, females in the east have begun to regard their ages as a secret too. The address term "meinü" without age indication is popular.

#### 4.4 Situations and sociolinguistic functions

As to the places where the address term "meinü" is mostly heard, the answers in the questionnaires are various in kind. One of the most mentioned places is 'sites of consumption' including shopping malls, clothing stores, supermarkets, cosmetics shops, beauty salons, and so on. These places are also the sites that "meinü" is frequently addressed based on the author's participant observation. Quite a few examples were picked up during the data collection. For instance, in clothing stores these sayings can be heard from time to time. "Beautiful girls, come in and look at the clothes in our store, please!" (美女們, 請進來看一下嘛!) "The clothes here are especially designed for the people like you who are beautiful and elegant. The clothes will make you look more beautiful." (我們這兒的衣服就是專門為你這樣有氣質的美女設計的, 穿上之後更靚。) Obviously, the sales assistants address the female customers as "meinü" and try to persuade them to buy

the clothes in the store. Austin's speech acts theory can explain the examples above quite well. According to Austin (1962), a speaker might be performing three acts simultaneously when speaking: locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. A locutionary act is the act of uttering and the literal meaning of the sentence. An illocutionary act is the act of expressing the speaker's intention; it is the act performed in saying something. A perlocutionary act is the act performed by or resulting from saying something; it is the consequence of, or the change brought by the utterance. In view of Austin's model, the major function the address term "meinü" in the clothing stores is to perform the illocutionary act, namely, try to persuade the customers to buy the clothes. The main aim of the utilization of this honorific term is to promote their products.

In addition to the speech acts theory, the politeness principle by Leech (1983) can explain the examples as well. According to Leech, two basic maxims of the politeness principle are Approbation Maxim and Modesty Maxim. These maxims are to lower the position of self and to show respect and compliment to others. For example, an advertisement was seen on the campus of Beijing Foreign Studies University which read as follows.

想參加 XXX 醫院推出的免費視力測試的美女帥哥, 請於 6 月 19 號中午 12 點到文化廣場處登記。  
(Beautiful ladies and handsome fellows, if you want to have their eye sights tested for free by XXX Hospital, please register at the Culture Square at 12 o'clock on June 19.)

If the address terms "美女帥哥" in the advertisement is changed into "近視眼患者", the promotion activity might not be successful, because it may damage the images of the students and make them declined to go for testing. In contrast, the honorific address terms are polite and showing respect to the addressees, which will be popular.

The second group of situations appeared most frequent in the questionnaires is connected with interpersonal relationship building, such as parties with friends, internet chatting, cell phone message sending, etc. The previous discussion has shown that this address term is mainly adopted by people that are familiar with each other, therefore, it is usually used to enhance the relationship between them.

Considering the motivations of utilizing this term, the answers from the 10 subjects randomly selected for interview show that there is usually no specific motivations if this term is used between interlocutors that are familiar with each other, though it helps to compliment the addressee and reduce the distance between them. However, there are motivations if it is used between strangers, especially at those promotion sites, such as shopping malls, clothing stores, cosmetics stores, and so on.

## 5. CONCLUSION

It is well known that address terms play a crucial role in our daily life and it is necessary to investigate its use in our society. Address form is in nature relational and thus a language variable that mirrors social and political reality.

To summarize, I return to the five research questions. Firstly, the majority of the first reference of “meinü” in all the four cities is a common address term. Secondly, there is a slightly geographical difference among the four cities with coastal cities Guangzhou and Shanghai having the greater popularity of the address term “meinü” utilization. What is more, there is also gender difference in the utilization of this term with males more frequent use than females. Thirdly, the relationships between the addresser and the addressee are usually intimates or acquaintances, with just a small proportion of strangers. And the motivations of using the address term “meinü” between these different relationships of

people are different. For intimates, the motivations are weak, mainly complimenting and enhancing interpersonal relations. For strangers, the motivations are usually strong, with the purpose of products promotion. Fourthly, the sites of consumption and interpersonal relationship building are the situations in which the address term “meinü” is mostly used. Last but not least, the sociolinguistic functions of this term are multiple. On the one hand, it can be used as a discourse strategy to promote the interpersonal relationships. On the other, it can perform the illocutionary act by saying the term.

At the end of this paper, it must be pointed out that this is only a small scale study on the newly emerged address term “meinü”, exploring the gender and geographical differences in address term using, the relationship between the interlocutors and its sociolinguistic functions in communication. In addition, some of the variables, such as the interlocutors’ occupations are not investigated. Therefore, further efforts need to be made on the research of this topic.

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