

On the actuation of semantic change: The case of *tongzhi*

Andrew D. Wong *

*Department of Linguistics, University of Hawaii at Manoa, 561 Moore Hall, 1890 East-West Road,
Honolulu, HI 96822, USA*

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Abstract

This article addresses a lacuna in research on the actuation of semantic change by shedding new light on speakers' motivation. Focusing on the semantic change of *tongzhi* from 'comrade' to 'sexual minorities' in Hong Kong, it argues that the semantic change of social category labels is sometimes actuated by speakers' desire to index different stances and to project different personae. Yet the speakers' agency involved is both enabled and constrained by the discursive history of the term and larger socio-historical processes. This study also demonstrates the importance of uncovering speakers' motivations through the use of different data collection methods.

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1. Introduction

To develop a satisfactory theory of language change, Weinreich et al. (1968, p. 102) state that the problem of actuation – i.e. why did a linguistic change take place in a particular language at a given time? – must be adequately addressed. Reporting the results of a case study, this article examines the issue of actuation – in particular, the actuation of semantic change. Compared to sound change, semantic change is an unexplored terrain for sociolinguists. As discussed in detail in the next section, the actuation of semantic

* Tel.: +808 956 3225; fax: +808 956 9166.

E-mail address: adwwong@hawaii.edu

change has mostly been studied by semanticists, historical linguists, and cognitive linguists. The present article focuses on the semantic change of a social category label – namely, *tongzhi* – from ‘comrade’ to ‘sexual minorities’ in Hong Kong.¹ This Chinese label was first adopted in Republican China as an address term for those involved in the Nationalist Revolution. It was then taken up by Chinese Communists to refer to those fighting for Communist ideals. After 1949, it was used as an address term by the general public in mainland China. Since the opening up of the market economy of China in 1978, it has become disfavored due to its political connotations. In the late 1980s, it was appropriated by gay rights activists in Hong Kong to refer to sexual minorities. In the mid-1990s, mainstream newspapers such as *Apple Daily* and *Oriental Daily News* also began to use *tongzhi* as a term of reference for individuals who belong to sexual minority groups. Given that the semantic change of *tongzhi* is rather recent, it is relatively easy to trace its historical development. Focusing on the embedding of the semantic change of *tongzhi* in actual discourse, this article aims to uncover the motivations for its actuation. Since gay rights activists in Hong Kong constitute the first community of practice in which the actuation of the semantic change took place, an examination of their use of the term will yield important insights into the social motivations for this semantic change.

It might be argued that speakers’ motivation plays a more important role in the actuation of semantic change than in the actuation of sound change. Since speakers are sometimes able to articulate their views on the semantic change of certain words (e.g. *gay*, *queer*), it is often believed that semantic change (especially the semantic change of social category labels) operates at a higher level of speakers’ consciousness than sound change. Given that the study of language variation and change focuses on the spread of linguistic change through speakers’ unconscious adoption, ‘conscious’ changes remain at the margins of sociolinguistics proper (Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2003; Eckert, 2003). As a result, many linguistic phenomena that involve any conscious monitoring are left unexamined. Yet these phenomena are no less important than the ones that presumably operate below the level of consciousness. As Thomason (1999) argues, speakers’ deliberate choices may lead to significant lexical and even grammatical changes. Similarly, in discussing feminists’ campaign against sexism in language (which is a rather conscious attempt to rid the English language of sexist linguistic forms), Cameron states:

The general point here is that there are instances – this is one – where we can locate the specific and concrete steps leading to an observable change in some people’s linguistic behavior and in the system itself. . . It would of course be wrong to claim that all linguistic change is of this kind. . . But some linguistic changes *are* of this kind,

¹ The Chinese label *tongzhi* is a superordinate term that refers to members of sexual minority groups (i.e. lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered people). Sometimes, it is also used as a male-specific term to refer to gay men only (see Wong, 2003, Chap. 4). In this article, I use ‘sexual minorities’ as a short-hand term for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgenders, and transsexuals. *Tongzhi* is the *pinyin* (i.e. romanization) of the Chinese expression in Mandarin. In Cantonese, it is pronounced as *tung4-ji3* (4 – low falling tone; 3 – mid level tone). Since all the interviews were conducted in Cantonese, Cantonese (rather than Mandarin) romanization is used. The only exceptions are original Mandarin quotes, names of people and places in Taiwan and mainland China, Taiwanese and mainland Chinese book titles, and the terms *tongzhi* and *gay*. *Tongzhi* is used more often than its Cantonese counterpart in academic writing in English (see, e.g. Chou, 2000), and *gay* is a loanword from English. The romanization used in this article is based on the Yale system (see Matthews and Yip, 1994). For easier reading, tones are not indicated.

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