

Disputed memory and the social interactive functions of remembering/forgetting expressions in Mandarin conversation



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Abstract

Remembering (including forgetting) is both an important cognitive process and a pervasive linguistic phenomenon. This paper focuses on a less researched phenomenon in remembrance, namely, how remembrance can be disputed by interlocutors in conversation. I show, with data from audio/video-recorded Mandarin conversations, that disputed remembering in the form of debating, augmentation, emendation, and alternation, etc. is often displayed in the service of social interaction. The types of disputed memory analyzed include (1) disputes between interlocutors with regard to a past experience; (2) selective (or contradictory) remembering by the same speaker; (3) adults disputing and elaborating on memory on behalf of children; and (4) mother–children memory disputes regarding children's past behaviors. The Mandarin data involving remembering add to the linguistically and socio-culturally diverse range of forms and functions of negative epistemic expressions.

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1. Introduction

Remembering (including forgetting) is both an important cognitive process and a pervasive linguistic phenomenon (as exemplified by the rich and diverse lexical expressions and frequent uses in many languages; see [Tao, 2001, 2003](#) for case studies of English). Interest in human memory has been shown to be well documented from antiquity ([Yates, 1966](#); [Amberber, 2007](#)) and has become an increasingly important topic for modern scientific research ([Middleton and Edwards, 1990](#)). While the topic of human memory has been pursued by a wide range of disciplines, the focus seems to have customarily been on the individual mind, especially individual's cognitive capacities as examined out of natural social context (mostly in lab experiments, simulations, and modeling). This approach, aptly termed the “single-minded” approach by [Middleton and Edwards \(1990:1\)](#), is dominant in many research fields such as psychology and psycholinguistics. However, in the past few decades, research has taken new turns that have resulted in refreshing findings. As will be reviewed in the next section, discursive psychology, conversation analysis, interactional linguistics, corpus linguistics, etc. have all made important inroads into the nature of memory/remembrance and language. In this paper, I will focus on a particular phenomenon in memory in discourse interaction, called disputed memory, and analyze its social interactive functions. Roughly speaking, disputed memory refers to conversation segments where different speakers, or the same speaker in different turns, contradict each other in some ways in the recollection of past events or

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experiences. Typically these episodes manifest as either (a) one speaker says that s/he remembers something while another says that s/he does not, or (b) a speaker's memory appears to be selective or contradictory. I will show that the act of talking about or engaging in contested remembrance is not necessarily due to cognitive defects or memory lapses per se, but rather memory can be represented dynamically and interactively, with its exact motivation depending on the interpersonal goals of the communicative setting that speakers found themselves in. This paper contributes to our understanding of negative epistemics in that it takes an interactional linguistics approach by investigating a range of memory-related expressions in interaction. In addition, since the data come from Mandarin Chinese, this study also makes a contribution in terms of expanding of the range of languages that can be brought to bear on the working of discursive memory (Edwards et al., 1992) and of epistemic domain and status in conversational interaction (Heritage, 2012).

2. Review of relevant research approaches

As alluded to earlier, interest in the interlocking relationship between memory, cognitive, social interaction, culture, and language has had a long tradition. Furthermore, there are strong parallel trends in a number of fields that call for more efforts on the social interactive aspect of remembering and on patterns of use in actual communicative settings. For example, in psychology, in contrast with standard cognitive psychology practices, discursive psychology insists that remembering and forgetting be treated as inherently social activities (Middleton and Edwards, 1990:1). Practitioners in discursive psychology promote such research themes as “remembering together”, the social practices of commemoration, the social foundation and context of individual memory, rhetorical organization of remembering and forgetting, social institutional remembering and forgetting, and the forms of social practices in the continuity of our lives (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). As Billig (1997/2001:213) points out,

The business of remembering can be a highly rhetorical or controversial business, so that the memory-claims might be accomplishing a variety of interactive business.

Discursive psychology (DP) draws heavily on the principles of Ethnomethodology (EM, Garfinkel, 1967), which emphasizes the local procedures and processes in accomplishing everyday activities, and conversation analysis (CA), which views conversation as the primordial site where human sociality takes place while emphasizing the orderliness and interactional achievement of conversational conduct (see, e.g. Sacks et al., 1974; Goodwin, 1981). In CA, also, groundbreaking research has been conducted focusing on the social foundations of epistemic access, epistemic primacy, and epistemic responsibility as well as the dynamic aspects of knowledge in action (Stivers et al., 2011; Heritage, 2012). More importantly, work in CA (e.g. Goodwin, 1987) has demonstrated that often-neglected phenomena such as forgetfulness (displaying uncertainty or lapse in memory) can serve as interactive resources in everyday conversation. Goodwin (1987) shows that speakers can bring relevant material into prominence by displaying uncertainty about it. More interestingly, Goodwin shows that forgetfulness can also serve to restructure the participation framework in the ongoing interaction in various ways (for example, in indexing “discourse identities” such as *knowing* and *unknowing* recipients). Influences from EM and CA have sparked studies in various applied fields, as exemplified by the work of Muntigl and Choi (2010), where the role of displays of not-remembering is argued to be an epistemic resource in couples therapy, which, as they show, can allow speakers to avoid accountability, shift footing, ascribe responsibility, and display resistance, in therapeutic sessions.

Given the pervasiveness of human memory and the fact that memory is often realized as verbalization (Chafe, 1973, 1994; Middleton and Edwards, 1990; Edwards and Potter, 1992), it is not surprising that memory and remembrance have figured prominently in linguists' agenda (Pishwa, 2006). Indeed, the field of linguistics has seen its share of diverse approaches to human memory. Some of the works debate the role of remembering as a basic semantic and cultural concept (see Wierzbicka, 2007), while most other studies focus on the syntax of such verbs as *remember* and *forget*. For example, many syntacticians are interested in exploring if and to what extent the semantic properties of verbs such as *remember* determine their syntactic behaviors (complement types in particular), whether the analysis is based on isolated sentences (Van Valin and Wilkins, 1993 and (a critique of it in) Fanego, 1996; Zalizniak, 2007) or written corpus data (Goddard, 2007; Schalley and Kuhn, 2007).

More interactively oriented, discourse analysis addresses the shortfalls of the prevailing linguistic program by utilizing corpus data from both spoken and written registers and in recognizing interactional properties as a central factor, paralleling what discursive psychology promotes in psychology. For example, Tao (2001, 2003) demonstrates that the discourse patterns of *remember* and *forget* expressions in American English differ radically from what grammarians have been describing, in a number of areas, and with a strong quality of formulaicity. Usage-based studies show that while it is important to recognize a wide range of syntactic patterns in these verbs (as is done in Goddard, 2007), overlooking common discourse patterns will miss the fact that many of these patterns are indeed pragmatically-loaded forms with highly specific interactive functions such as attention-getting and turn-management (as shown in Tao, 2003). This is

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