The multiple uses of the second person singular pronoun  

The multiple uses of the second person singular pronoun *ni* in conversational Mandarin

Yung-O Biq*

*Received October 1989; revised version December 1990*

In addition to its canonical propositional (deictic) use, the second person singular pronoun in Mandarin, *ni*, can be used in various other ways in conversation. This paper discusses three of these uses, the impersonal, the dramatic, and the metalinguistic, with a focus on the last one. The metalinguistic use of *ni* is distinguished from the other uses because it is non-propositional, functioning as a vocative in speech. Its indexicality points to the participant role of the intended recipient of speech in the discourse situation rather than to the individual in that role. The metalinguistic *ni* is conjectured to be the "short-circuited" form of several Mandarin epistemic phrases. It is concluded that the metalinguistic, impersonal, and dramatic uses of *ni* all share the characteristic of being devices for reinforcing the addressee's involvement in what s/he is being told.

1. Introduction

One of the issues surrounding personal deixis is that of the relationship between the grammatical categories for personal deixis (e.g., first person and second person) and the interactional categories for participant roles (e.g., speaker and addressee). On the one hand, grammatical persons can be used non-deictically so that their referents are not the participants in the discourse situation where the utterance containing these grammatical persons occurs. On the other hand, while the categorization of participant roles is more complex than the speaker-addressee dyad (Levinson 1988), participant roles can be expressed by linguistic means other than grammatical persons, as in the

* I am grateful to Adrienne Lehrer, Sandy Thompson, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to thank Mary Erbaugh, Guo Jiasheng, Paul Hopper, Randy LaPolla, Phil Robyn, Mary Scott, and the executive editor of *JoP*, Richard W. Janney, for their interest, suggestions, and support. The usual disclaimers, of course, apply.

* Author's address: Yung-O Biq, Department of Foreign Languages, Humanities 333, San Francisco State University, 1600 Holloway Ave., San Francisco, CA 94132, USA.

0378-2166/91/$03.50 © 1991 — Elsevier Science Publishers B.V. (North-Holland)
use of the Mandarin renjia ‘other people’ for referring to the speaker (Chao 1968, Farris 1988).

In this paper I attempt to examine how the second person singular pronoun ni in Chinese is used in conversational Mandarin in ways other than its typical deictic function. I begin with the one-form-multiple-function relation, then shift to the grammatical-person-participant-role relation, and finally come to the relation between pragmatics and grammar in discourse. I distinguish four types of ni used in conversation: the propositional ni, the impersonal ni, the dramatic ni, and the metalinguistic ni. After outlining the impersonal use (section 2.1) and the dramatic use (section 2.2), I concentrate on the last, metalinguistic use. This use is metalinguistic because it does not constitute part of the propositional content conveyed by the discourse unit to which ni is attached (section 3.1). It operates rather as a form of parenthetical address (section 3.2), manifesting an indexicality pointing to the role of addressee rather than referring to the individuals in that role (section 3.3). I argue that the metalinguistic use of ni is probably at the incipient stage of becoming a ‘short-circuited’ form for several Mandarin epistemic phrases (section 3.4). Finally, I conclude by summarizing the differences and similarities among the four uses of ni (section 4).¹

The first use of ni mentioned above, the propositional use, refers to the canonical deictic use of the second person singular pronoun, which constitutes part of the propositional content conveyed by the utterance of a sentence that contains it. An example of this would be (1), where the singular form ni is used to refer to the intended recipient of the utterance.²

(1) Wo haoxiang jian-guo ni.
    I seem see-EXP 2s
    ‘I seem to have seen you before.’ (from Lu 1980: 370)

The propositional (deictic) use of the second person singular pronoun has been discussed extensively in the literature (e.g., Lyons 1977, Levinson 1983). Although it is probably the base upon which other uses are modeled, the discussion of it in this paper will be limited only to where it relates to the other uses. The paper focuses on the latter three types - especially the last,

¹ Both constructed examples and conversational examples are used in this paper. Conversational examples are (3)-(9). They are all marked with index symbols such as (XYZ:123). The conversational data used here come from two kinds of casual conversation among native speakers of Mandarin. One set constitutes two one-hour conversations between two anonymous persons, a female and a male. The other set constitutes three multi-party conversations, the length of each being 45 minutes. I was a participant in all three multi-party conversations, although each time with a different group of friends. I want to thank Sandy Thompson for making the first set of tape recordings accessible for my use. I also want to express my appreciation for the interest and good humor of those who allowed me to tape-record their speech.

² Plurality is marked in Mandarin personal pronouns, and the plural form for the second person is nimen.
metalinguistic ni – and the two notions of ‘discourse situation’ and ‘described situation’ will be used frequently. The former simply refers to the context in which speech occurs, including to whom and how something is said. The latter refers to whatever is being talked about in the speaker’s speech.

2. The impersonal ni and the dramatic ni

2.1. The impersonal ni

The impersonal use of the second person singular ni refers to its substitution for an indefinite pronoun in casual speech. Many languages demonstrate the impersonal use of pronouns, including English (Kitagawa and Lehrer 1990). A Mandarin example of ni used impersonally is (2):

(2) Nei-xie xiao haizi nao de jiao ni bu neng zhuangxin that-PL small child make noise RST CUS 2s NEG can concentrate zuo shi.
do thing
‘Those children make such a noise, it makes you (me, one) unable to concentrate on your (my, one’s) work.’ (from Chao 1968: 648–649)

The impersonal ni is used frequently in Mandarin discourse, and only the context can provide clues for the domain of identity of its intended referent. All six ni’s used in the following (simplified) segment of conversation about Chinese barefoot doctors are impersonal ni. However, there are three different actual referents involved.

(3) (MSB: 210)
(F is contrasting Chinese barefoot doctors with Western-trained doctors.)
1F. Zai Zhongguo ta, bu (??) xiang, bu xiang Meiguo in China it NEG resemble NEG resemble America
2 zheiyangr yitao, ni bixu zheige, eh, shiba,
this-way one-set 2s have-to this eh right
3 duoshao ji baimen gongke dou dou: Ladingwen dengdeng many several hundred-M course all all Latin etc.
4 dou nian tong le ni cai you zige all read through CRS 2s then have qualification
5 dang yige yisheng, birushuo ni zheige ren bu be one doctor for-example 2s this person NEG
6 hui biede, danshi hui yixie hen jibende zheige, eh, know other but know some INT basic this eh

This is obvious, judging from the entire discourse context.
The first two *ni*'s (lines 2 and 4) refer to an indefinite person in the American medical educational system. The next three *ni*'s (lines 5, 7, and 8) refer to an indefinite Chinese barefoot doctor. The last *ni* (line 10) refers to whoever is in the position of making policy decisions about medical education in China.

As pointed out by Kitagawa and Lehrer (1990), the impersonal use of the second person pronoun in discourse provides the rhetorical effect of vividness, immediacy, and camaraderie. This effect is accomplished “because the speaker assigns a major ‘actor’ role to the addressee. In so doing, s/he is letting the hearer into the speaker’s world view, implying that the hearer also shares the same perspective. This can be considered as an act of camaraderie” (p. 752). The addressee, that is, as a participant in the discourse situation, is ‘involved’ in the described situation for pragmatic reasons. This *pragmatic* involvement is apparently different from the way the same addressee, as the referent of the deictic pronoun in its propositional use, would be *proposititionally* involved in the described situation. Thus, whether the impersonal *ni* is deictic or not would seem to be unclear.

2.2 *The dramatic* *ni*

What I call the dramatic use of *ni* is closely related to the impersonal use, and the distinction between the two is often not entirely clear. The dramatic *ni* occurs as part of the shifting of the entire frame of reference from the discourse situation to the described situation. The speaker now (temporarily)
deserts his/her point of view, creating a story impersonation by assuming the role of one of the characters in the described situation and using ni to address another character in the same situation. During such a story impersonation, personal pronouns are ‘relativized’ according to the described situation (character X is ‘I’, character Y is ‘you’, etc.) rather than according to the discourse situation (speaker is ‘I’, addressee is ‘you’, etc.). In other words, the pronouns are used as in quoted speech in written language, and the dramatic use is thus non-deictic. An example of this would be (4).

(4) (CMN: 49)
(F is on the topic of people’s communes.)

1F. Dangran zhe limian you yi ge wenti jiu shi, eh, of-course this inside have one M problem just is eh
2 youde ren ne ta keyi juede fanzheng wo ye dei some people PRT 3s may feel anyway I also have-to
3 fen liangshi ta jiu: bu haohao ganhuo zhei ge jiu = share food 3s then NEG well work this M then
4M. Mmm--

mrm
5F. = dei kao: sixiang jiaoyu, bu bu neng kao have-to depend thought education NEG NEG can depend
6 qiangpuo ye bu neng: kao yi zhong: weixie de banfa force also NEG can depend one M threaten NOM way
7M. Dui. right
8F. = banfa ni bu haohao ganhuo rang ni qiong xiaqu mei fan way 2s NEG well work let 2s poor down NEG food
9 chi jiu kao dajia zijue. eat just depend everyone conscientious
10M. Mmhum. mrmhm

F. Of course there’s one problem in here that is, eh, There’re people who may feel that ‘I have to share the food (with other people) anyway’ so: he doesn’t work hard. This got to depend on: ideological =
M. Mmm--
F. = education. (It) couldn’t be solved by imposition. Nor: could =
M. Right.
F. = it be solved by: threat (like,) ‘(Since) you don’t work hard, (we’ll) let you stay poor and have nothing to eat.’ It just depends on =
M. Mmhum.
F. = everyone’s conscientiousness.
With the help of punctuation to mark quoted speech, it is clear that the two
ni’s in line 8 of this scenario refer to someone who doesn’t want to work hard.
The speaker has given up her speaker’s viewpoint and has assumed the voice
of another character in the same scenario (a fellow peasant or the leader of
the commune, etc.).

Since the dramatic use is part of the total shift of the frame of reference, we
do see the plural form nimen being used in this way. Consider how nimen and
the first person singular wo are used in (5):

(5) (QNS: 339)
(S is talking about how one feels when one learns that his/her speech
has been tape-recorded. There are five people listening to S talking at
the time.)
1S. Renjia yi ting ao, ziji bei luyin ao:
other-people once hear PRT self PAS record PRT
2 you dian pa, haoxiangshi,

have bit fear as-if
3 Ah! Wo bu shi bu keyi xizao bei nimen kan,
Ah I NEG be NEG can take-bath PAS 2p see
4 danshi: Ni "meiyou xian gen wo jiang,
but 2s NEG in-advance with I speak
5 Ha!

ha
6ALL. Hahaha ...

S. When people hear, eh, that they’ve been tape-recorded, eh, they’re a
little upset. It is as if, ‘Hey! It’s not that you (plural) can’t watch me
taking a bath, but: you (singular) didn’t let me know ahead =

Z. Ha!

S. = of time,’

All. Hahaha ...

In (5), what S says in lines 3 and 4 is about a hypothetical, imagined
scenario. Here, the first person wo (lines 3 and 4) does not refer to S himself,
but rather to the character in the hypothetical, imagined scenario, i.e., to the
person being watched while taking a bath. In like fashion, the second person
plural nimen (line 3) refers to the (hypothetical) addressees of this (bath-
taking) character’s speech (who supposedly watched this person taking a
bath), not to the actual addressees of S’s speech. It is obvious, however, that
the plural form is chosen over the singular form because there is more than
one addressee in the discourse situation.

Footnote 4: Notice that S is making an analogy by using an explicit marker haoxiang ‘resemble, as if’ in
line 2.
While in the impersonal use of *ni* the speaker still retains his/her point of view, describing what s/he is talking about even though the addressee of the discourse has been pragmatically dragged into the described situation, in the dramatic use, the speaker loses his/her own point of view temporarily. During the story impersonation, s/he is, in fact, not describing what s/he is talking about, but rather acting it out. The dramatic use of *ni* is found more frequently in spoken language than in written language, probably due to the different degrees of spontaneity allowed in these types of discourse.

However, the boundary between the impersonal and dramatic use of *ni* is not always clear-cut, and the latter is probably best seen as impersonal use in acceleration: more than one character is impersonated, so that a complete shift of the frame of reference takes place. The dramatic use of *ni* is also a rhetorical device for more vividly presenting the described situation. Furthermore, the impersonal use can be mixed with switches of frame of reference in story impersonation. The second person singular in (5) (line 4), for example, is a case in point. Another example is (6), in which the first and third persons are relativized to characters in the described situation, while the second person *ni* is used impersonally.

(6) (MSB: 891)
(On ‘Sons are better or daughters are better?’, F is stating the traditional Chinese view, i.e., that since daughters will have to leave home after they are married, people prefer sons.)

1F. Na Suoyi ta dangran yao erzi, duibudui?
then so 3s of-course want son right

2M. Mmmmm.

Mmmmm

3F. Ni jishi shuo nuer gen erzi yiyang shi yiyang hao keshi
2s even say daughter and son same be same good but

4 dao shihou ta jihun dou zou le wo zenameban ne?
at time 3s marry all leave CRS I what-to-do PRT

F. Then so of course s/he wants a son, right?
M. Mmmmm.

F. Even if you say that daughters are as good as sons but (‘) when the time comes (and) she gets married and leaves home then what do I do? (‘)

In line 1, inferring (from prior arguments) that the parent(s) no doubt want a son, F uses the third person pronoun *ta* to refer to ‘parent’. In line 4, however, *ta* refers to a daughter who is married out, and the first person *wo* ‘I’ is used to refer to the parent(s). The speaker has apparently made a switch of frame of reference and is now impersonating the son-favoring parent(s). The *ni* at line 3 personifies, at most, some hypothetical bystander in this described situation, not a ‘real’ character in the situation.
From what we have seen, the impersonal and dramatic uses of *ni* are both rhetorical devices that allow the speaker to blend the described situation with the discourse situation, thus increasing the vividness of his/her speech.

3. The metalinguistic *ni*

3.1. Metalinguistic vs. propositional

Contrary to the propositional use of *ni*, the metalinguistic use of *ni* does not contribute to the propositional content expressed by the discourse unit to which it is attached. Instead, *ni* serves as a vocative, calling the hearer’s attention to the propositional content, and indicating the speaker’s emphasis on what s/he is saying. This type of *ni* appears regularly only in conversation, not in planned discourse types such as the expository essay. Consider, for example, (7):

(7) (MSB: 42)
(F is emphasizing the importance of education for the development of medicine.)
1F. Jiaoyu shiye fazhanle yihou keyi peiyang geng duode
education enterprise develop after can train still more-ASS
2 yisheng; , eh: zhei shi yifangmian danshi
doctor eh this be one-side but
3 ruguo bu, ah?
if NEG what?
4M. zhei shi yi, yi, yi, yiyao
this be medicine jiaoyu
education
5F. jishi yiyao, dui ma, ni
just medicine right PRT 2s
6 zhengger de xuxiao ye duo le, eh, shang xiaoxue shang
whole ASS school also more CRS eh go elem-school go
7 zhongxue de ren dou duo le name shang yixueyuan de
mid-school ASS person all more CRS then go med.-school ASS
8 ren ye duo le, zhei shi yi fangmian.
person also more CRS this be one side

---

5 I take casual conversation and expository essay as two extremes in a continuum of modes of linguistic communication. Given the plurality of the variables affecting speech, the occurrence of the metalinguistic *ni* in planned discourse types is still possible (also in other modes of communication which fall in the middle range of the continuum). The point here, however, is the regularity and the frequency of its occurrence found in unplanned, spontaneous types of speech such as conversation.
F. Once education is developed many more doctors can be trained. Uh, this is one point but
   if not, ah?
M. This is med-, med-, med-, medical education
   Just medicine, surely, \( \langle ni \rangle \) the number of schools on the whole increases, eh, the number of people going to grade schools and middle schools increases, then the number of people going to medical schools will increase, too. This is one point.

\(Ni\), in line 5, prefacing what is to be said in lines 6–8, is not involved in the propositional content of the argument in these lines. F is making a prediction about the causal relation between the number of people who have had compulsory education and the number of people who will attend medical school. The intended recipient of this argument (i.e., the addressee, M) is not referred to. \(Ni\) here is thus not deictic in the propositional sense. More important, it is obviously also not involved in the structure of the upcoming clause. So \(ni\), in this case, is neither propositionally deictic, nor impersonal, nor dramatic. Its occurrence, rather, is strictly metalinguistic. It operates as a vocative at the speech-act level, calling the addressee in order to increase her/his attention to the upcoming talk.

Consider another example:

(8) (MSB: 53)
   (F says that in the past peasants in China did not have good medical care. She goes on to give examples to explain this point.)
1F. nongmin jibenshang haishi, debudaoyi yiyao zhaogu, peasant basically still cannot get medical care
2M. Mmhmhm.
3M. mmhmhm
3F. ye tebie shi zai pianpide difang, also especially be at remote place
4M. Mmhmhm.
5F. \(ni\) birushuo, Zhongguo de guoqu jiu you zheige wenti:, 2s for-example China past just have this-M problem
F. the peasants still basically couldn’t get medical care, M.
   Mmhmhm.
F. especially in remote places,
M. Mmhmhm.
F. \(\langle Ni\rangle\) for example, in the past China had this problem:,

In line 5, as F elaborates on her point by giving an example, \(ni\) prefaces the phrase \textit{birushuo} ‘for example’. Although \textit{birushuo} can be construed as an
imperative, ‘(you) take the following for example’, the phrase itself is an idiomatic one and is normally used alone (just like its English equivalent). This can be readily seen a few moments later when it is used again in (9):

(9) (MSB: 59)
(F is saying that the Western-trained doctors were not interested in the common diseases but rather:)
1F ... zhi xiang qu yanjiu zui jian duan birushuo  shenme
only want go study most advanced for example some
2 xin zang a, nao a zhe yile de dongxi.
heart etc. brain etc. this one type thing
F. (the Western-trained doctors) only wanted to study the most advanced
(subjects), for example, things like the heart or brain.

In (9) the phrase birushuo, ‘for example’, is not accompanied by ni. Adding or omitting the ni here would not change the content of what the speaker is saying. Again, the use of ni in (8) is metalinguistic: its insertion in line 5 serves to attract the hearer’s attention, indirectly highlighting the upcoming elaboration.

As ni, in its metalinguistic use, does, in fact, have a referent, and the referent is the addressee of the utterance, we must call this use deictic. It is not the same, however, as the canonical, propositional deictic use of ni, in which the second person pronoun constitutes part of the propositional content conveyed by the utterance containing it. Analogous to the distinction between descriptive uses of negation (e.g., ‘It is not warm here; it is cold’) and metalinguistic uses of negation (e.g., ‘It is not warm here; it is hot’) (cf. Horn 1985, Biq 1989), I would distinguish the propositional deictic ni from the metalinguistic deictic ni.

3.2. Parenthetical address

The metalinguistic use of ni is reminiscent of the vocative use of the English you, as discussed in Schegloff (1972), Zwick (1974), and Levinson (1983), who distinguish between summonses (calls) and addresses. Summonses or “[c]alls are designed to catch the addressee’s attention, addresses to maintain or emphasize the contact between speaker and addressee” (Zwick 1974: 787). In addition, “[s]ummonses are naturally utterance-initial, indeed conversation-initial ... and can be thought of as independent speech acts ... in their own right. Addresses are parenthetical and can occur in the sorts of locations that other parentheticals can occupy” (Levinson 1983: 71).

Nevertheless, the Mandarin metalinguistic ni and the English vocative you are different. As a vocative, the English you can be a call but not an address
(Zwicky 1974). Compare the behaviors of *you* and *whatsyourname* in (10), for example:

(10a) Hey *you/whatsyourname*, give me that boat hook!
(10b) What I think, *you/whatsyourname*, is that we ought to take the money and run. (from Zwicky 1974: 791)

While the vocative *you* is accentuated, followed by a pause, and often occurs with other attention-getters such as *hey*, as in (10a), the Mandarin *ni* is spoken without stress (and is thus parenthetical), is immediately followed by the ensuing utterance without a pause (and is thus not an independent speech act), and normally occurs without the co-occurrence of any other attention-getter. In other words, unlike the English *you*, the metalinguistic *ni* seems to be a parenthetical address type of vocative, according to the criteria given above, even though it typically occurs at the initial position of a unit of talk.

3.3. Participant role rather than individual referent

The metalinguistic use of the second person singular *ni* does not seem to spread to the plural *nimen*. The singular *ni* is always used in a metalinguistic capacity regardless of the number of intended recipients in the speech situation. Thus, it seems that although the metalinguistic *ni* is deictic, the indexicality reflected in this use is different from the type of indexicality that we normally expect in propositional use. Number distinction (singular vs. plural) is formally marked for the propositional use in Mandarin, but not for the metalinguistic use. The metalinguistic *ni* is used as a collective indexical, referring to the intended recipient(s) as a group. Or perhaps to put it in a better way, the metalinguistic *ni* refers to the participant role of the intended recipient(s) rather than to the individual(s) in that role. It is the role of intended recipient, as opposed to the role of speaker, that is being called upon. Who is in that role does not matter.

3.4. As short-circuited implicature?

Linguistic changes triggered by pragmatic motives have been addressed frequently (e.g., Horn 1988, Traugott 1989). The metalinguistic use of *ni*, I

---

6 That the metalinguistic *ni* does not occur as an independent discourse unit but is rather ‘attached to’ the following discourse unit is also evidenced by the application of the Mandarin tone sandhi rule, which does not operate between two third-tone syllables across discourse juncture. *Ni* has a third-tone, and in examples (7) and (8), the syllables immediately following the *ni* in question, i.e., *zheng* in (7) and *bi* in (8), both have a third tone. In both cases *ni* goes through a tone sandhi, changing from the ‘base’ third tone to the second tone.

7 I have not found any *nimen* used metalinguistically in my conversational data.
suspect, is at the incipient stage of becoming the 'short-circuited form' (Morgan 1978) of (interactional) epistemic phrases in Mandarin such as those listed in (11). In each case, the first gloss gives the literal meaning of the phrase, while the second and the third convey the epistemic meaning:

\[(11a) \text{Wo shuo } 'I say; I'd say; I think' \]
\[\text{Ni shuo } 'You say; You'd say; Don't you think?'
\]

\[(11b) \text{Wo kan } 'I see; I think; In my view' \]
\[\text{Ni kan } 'You see; Look; Don't you think?'
\]

\[(11c) \text{Wo xiang } 'I think; I believe (that ...)' \]
\[\text{Ni xiang } 'You think; Consider; Don't you think?'
\]

As Liu (1986) points out, when the subject is the first or second (but not third) person, the Mandarin verbs shuo 'speak', xiang 'think', and kan 'see' can function epistemically to express the speaker's emphasis on his/her upcoming speech. Liu lists some characteristics of these (interactional) epistemic phrases. First, as part of a conventional expression conveying the speaker's attitude, the verb cannot be negated, and it cannot be followed by aspect markers such as le (perfective), guo (experiential), or zhe (progressive), or be followed by resultative verb complements marked by de. Second, these phrases are typically used in dialogues, and some are never used in the written mode. Finally, although Liu does not mention this, these phrases are used only at the beginning of a discourse unit.\(^8\)

The Mandarin epistemic phrases in (11) are similar to the English evidential I think, which has further developed into a parenthetical in spoken English at the position following the (original) complement clause. In view of the possibility that these Chinese epistemic phrases might be examples of incipient grammaticization, like the English I think (Thompson and Mulac, forthcoming), I contend that the metalinguistic use of the Mandarin ni might be an even further instantiation of grammaticization, this time for Chinese epistemic phrases. Based on the principle of relevance (Grice 1975, Levinson 1983, Horn 1984), ni is probably the short-circuited form of the epistemic phrases in (11) to convey the speaker's highlighting of his/her upcoming speech.\(^9\)

Synchronically, this lexicalization process (which is one form of grammaticization) is not complete, because, as mentioned above, the metalinguistic use of ni does not presently occur in all discourse types. Moreover, it is doubtful whether the metalinguistic use will ever be found beyond typical spoken discourse, since the distinctive characteristics of spoken language, i.e.,

\(^8\) Liu does not discuss whether the subject has to be in the singular form or not. A few of her examples have the plural form of the second person nimen as the subject of the verb. However, in the majority of her examples the subject takes the singular form.

\(^9\) Beyond the 'specialization' principle (see this section), I do not have a good answer for why the second person ni is 'chosen' over the first person wo as the short-circuited form.
spontaneity and interactionality, seem to be the pragmatic force triggering this use. Similarly, historical evidence for the grammaticization of the epistemic phrases and the metalinguistic *ni* is hard to find, because these uses have presumably always been restricted to the spoken language.

Given the five principles of grammaticization discussed in Hopper (forthcoming), i.e., divergence, layering, specialization, persistence, and de-categorialization, the following facts seem to support this conjecture on a synchronic basis. First, as mentioned above, the verbs in the epistemic phrases in (11) do not take the usual trappings of verbs such as aspect markers. This is apparently a loss of verb categoriality, an instantiation of the de-categorialization principle. Second, *nimen* is rarely used in these epistemic phrases. According to the specialization principle, the plural form thus will probably be left out in the next round of grammaticization; and indeed, there seems to be no instance of the metalinguistic use of the plural *nimen*. Finally, as stated above, the change in the indexicality of the metalinguistic (as opposed to propositional) use of *ni* to refer to the role of the intended recipient (addressee) rather than to the individuals in that role also exemplifies the principle of de-categorialization.

4. Conclusion

In this paper I have distinguished four uses of the second person singular pronoun *ni* in Mandarin. I first discussed the impersonal use and the dramatic use, and found that both uses illustrate the pragmatically motivated blurring of the demarcation between the described situation (who is being talked about) and the discourse situation (to whom and how it is being talked about).

I then focused on how *ni* is used metalinguistically, arguing that it is non-propositional, functioning as an address to elicit the attention of the intended recipients of the speech. As the number distinction is neutralized in this use, the indexicality of the metalinguistic *ni* points to the role of the intended recipient (instead of referring to the individuals in that role), as it is in opposition with the role of the speaker. In addition, I suggested that the metalinguistic *ni* may be a (not yet completely conventionalized) ‘short-circuited’ form for some of the Mandarin epistemic phrases expressing the speaker’s strong attitude toward what s/he is saying. If this conjecture is supported by further diachronic evidence, it would then be a case of an ongoing grammaticization motivated by the spontaneity and interactionality that are characteristic of typical spoken discourse.

The metalinguistic use of *ni* is differentiated from the other three uses by the fact that it is propositionally not an element of the discourse unit in which
it occurs. In contrast to the impersonal and dramatic uses, the metalinguistic and the propositional uses are clearly deictic. However, the deixis in each case points to different things. To recapitulate, the metalinguistic use points to the participant role in the discourse situation, whereas the propositional use points to the individual(s) in that role. The similarities and differences between these four uses are summarized in table 1. In one way or another, the impersonal, dramatic, and metalinguistic uses of ni all share the characteristic of being grammatical devices for reinforcing the addressee’s involvement in what is being said.

Table 1
Uses of the second person singular pronoun ni in conversational Mandarin.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Propositional</th>
<th>Deictic</th>
<th>Participant role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Propositional</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dramatic</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>irrelevant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metalinguistic</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix: Transcription conventions

The conventions used for literal translation and for transcription and colloquial translation of the conversational examples are as follows:

**Conventions for literal translation**

- **2p** second person plural
- **2s** second person singular
- **3s** third person singular
- **ASS** associative phrase marker
- **BA** disposal marker
- **CUS** causative
- **CRS** currently relevant state
- **EXP** experiential aspect
- **INT** intensifier
- **M** measure word
- **NEG** negation
- **NOM** nominalizer
- **PAS** passive
- **PL** plurality
- **PRT** sentence-final particle
- **RST** resultative complement marker

**Conventions for transcription and colloquial translation**

Mandarin key words discussed in the text and their English equivalents in the translation are both italicized.
the starting point of an overlap between two speakers’ speech
:lengthened syllable
= continuous speech of the same speaker
(??) nondiscernible speech
( ) The English in the parentheses is my effort at paraphrasing the Chinese speech for deriving a more colloquial English translation.
< > The Chinese key word with no English equivalent that would make sense in the colloquial English translation of the whole speech

References