

“Are you a Dalao?”: The Use of Dalao in a Chinese Soccer Community

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This paper investigates the culture of dalao (Chinese: 大佬; Hong Kong Cantonese: dai-lou with a rising terminal tone) in a group of Chinese soccer players at a large public university in the Southeastern USA. By the culture of dalao, I am referring to the sociolinguistic phenomenon of members of the group using the address term dalao to address each other in both a virtual chatting environment as well as in face-to-face communications. I am taking an ethnographic approach to making sense of this phenomenon by being part of the group as a core member and being conscious and observant of the use of this address term in terms of the relationship between the interlocutors, the contexts, and the illocutionary forces associated with it. Simply put, a dalao is the big shot or the important guy in a certain group. When I explain this research to my peers, one question I get most often is if I am a dalao. While I have the tendency to refrain from acknowledging that I am a dalao, I hereby, on the outset of the paper, recognize my dalao status in the group. It is the observed convention of refusing to be called a dalao, and yet almost everyone is comfortable calling each other dalao, that caught my attention to look into this phenomenon.

Keywords: The culture of dalao, ethnographic approach, sociolinguistic phenomenon, illocutionary forces

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Introduction

This paper investigates the culture of dalao (Chinese: 大佬; Hong Kong Cantonese: dai-lou with a rising terminal tone) in a group of Chinese soccer players at a large public university in the Southeastern USA. By the culture of dalao, I am referring to the sociolinguistic phenomenon of members of the group using the address term dalao to address each other in both a virtual chatting environment as well as in face-to-face communications. I am taking an ethnographic approach to making sense of this phenomenon by being part of the group as a core member and being conscious and observant of the use of this address term in terms of the relationship between the interlocutors, the contexts, and the illocutionary forces associated with it. Simply put, a dalao is the big shot or the important guy in a certain group. When I explain this research to my peers, one question I get most often is if I am a dalao. While I have the tendency to refrain from acknowledging that I am a dalao, I hereby, on the outset of the paper, recognize my dalao status in the group. It is the observed convention of refusing to be called a dalao, and yet almost everyone is comfortable calling each other dalao, that caught my attention to look into this phenomenon.

Origin

Originated from Cantonese, dalao is a term that has multiple meanings based on the context, and it is an address term most commonly used in Hong Kong (HK). In the familial domain, dalao may refer to the oldest brother in a family. The counterpart address term of dalao for a younger brother is 细佬 (Mandarin Chinese: xilao; Cantonese: sai-lou). In the political arena, dalao bears derogatory connotation for senior members who manipulate decision-making and appropriate power clandestinely in a political party. In HK gang culture, a dalao invariably means the head of the gang. In the business sector, dalao is often used to refer to the business tycoons such as Jack Ma and Bill Gates. In some Cantonese-speaking area, dalao can be used to address someone who is respected and has authority, which is remotely similar to the observed phenomenon in this soccer group. However, the reason why the use of dalao in this group is unique is that there are very few Cantonese speakers in this group, and that the few Cantonese speakers in the group are hardly ever observed using dalao to address others.

In Chinese etymology, the character lao (佬) has two parts. The left part (亻) is a prefix for the meaning of a person (人), while the right part, the stem of the character, provides the sound (lao) and the meaning

(old). Put together, dalao literally means big old person, with a gender bias toward man. Therefore, dalao usually means the big old man or big old guy. The female counterpart of dalao in the familial domain would be big sister, but in other domains, a female counterpart is not found by me who is not a native speaker of Cantonese.

Method

Context

The soccer group consists of members who are mostly Chinese students at a university in southeastern USA. There are over 100 Chinese undergraduate and graduate students and about 5 non-Chinese speakers. As a regular member, we play soccer twice a week and discuss soccer-related topics in the mobile chat group. We also discuss non-soccer related topics frequently. Besides weekly soccer games, many group members come from the same departments at the university and meet in situations other than the soccer games. Since we are engaged in a practice, which is soccer, and we discuss issues related to this practice on a regular basis, the concept of community of practice is helpful for me to understand the context of the research question. A community of practice (CoP) framework considers language as a tool for participation in activities, for appropriating and shaping other tools, and for promoting engagement between individuals. What is central to a CoP is the notion of practice. In other words, a CoP is founded on the activities in which community members engage with one another negotiate meaning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This engagement involves members of the community "defining identities, establishing who is who, who is good at what, who knows what, who is easy or hard to get along with" (Wenger, 1998, p. 95). In this community mediated by the practices of playing soccer and discussions on our mobile devices, engagement means that members participate in overlapping, yet different ways.

Milroy & Milroy's (1992) concept of networks is helpful in describing the relations among members of the community of practice. Members of this group (soccer enthusiasts) meet for soccer at least weekly. Besides the meetings for playing soccer, there are different subgroups of members who know each other from other venues. For example, at least 11 of the members live in the same off-campus apartment complex. In other words, many of them are neighbors. Another group of members work and study in the same university building. Specifically, chemical engineering, computer science, and material science are the three major programs that have many Chinese students who are part of this community of practice. Member also know each other for other reasons such as sharing the same geographic origin in China, or sharing the same

alma mater university, or participating in the same student organization, i.e. the Chinese Student Association on campus. Therefore, this is a highly dense and multiplex network. Because of this density and multiplexity, group members often develop new hobbies and participate in new athletic and entertainment activities together based on this membership, i.e. flag football, Ultimate Frisbee, and cooking parties.

Within this soccer group, several linguistic features and interaction patterns characterize this group as a linguistic community. For example, the use of 祝 (pinyin: zhu; English: wish/hope) to indicate absence. Used in a sentence, 今天我祝了 (pinyin: jintian wo zhu le; English: Today I wish) means “I’m not coming (to play) today.” Or simply using this single character instead of the whole sentence would suffice the communicative purpose. The origin of this unique interaction pattern comes from the whole meaning that “I can’t make it today, and I wish you all have a good time.” Now, group members just use “wish” to say “I’m not coming today.” Gumperz (1971) defines a linguistic community as “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usage” (Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 124). The above observations, among others, are unique to this particular group of students because in another soccer group in my previous institution in Nashville, TN, and in my current soccer community in Ithaca, NY, the Chinese students never showed such interaction patterns.

Hymes (1974) offers a more nuanced insight into the distinction between participating in a speech community and being a full member of the community. From my observation, the older group members tend to use the interaction patterns more frequently and spontaneously, thus being full members of the community. In the meantime, newer members seemingly resist those patterns. It is observed that some newer members adopt the interaction patterns more readily, making them the innovators among the newer and marginalized members of the group.

Ethnographic Observations

Following Labov’s (1972) survey study of the variation of English use in New York City, specifically in the different use of postvocalic r across different social classes in the department stores in NYC, a number of this kind of survey research occurred to study the macro-level of sociolinguistics, for example, the class, gender, place, and other patterns of language variation in the society. However, this kind of survey research, according to Eckert (1989) claims that they do not capture the “behavior, or practice, that produces and reproduces that structure” (in Coupland & Jawarski, 2009, p. 137). Eckert moved away from the macro-

level methodology in sociolinguistics research and turned to ethnography to get a better understanding of linguistic activities of people. Instead of going into a study with preconceived categories, or sociolinguistic variables like class and gender, ethnographic studies spend long periods of time within the community, being observant and allowing themes, meanings, and social categories become salient.

In the current study with the Chinese soccer group, I have been observing this phenomenon ever since I became a member of it. I became a member of the group in the fall of 2014. But it was after a year when the use of dalao caught my attention and I began thinking about it. Therefore, I have been observing this group's use of the term for over two years. In a personal reflection, the term did not register with me in the first year because I was a newbie in the group, thus slow to internalize the group dynamics. On the other hand, being a newbie, I was powerless in the group in that I did not have a say in which position I want to play, when to play a game, or if I get to play in the starting lineup. It was after I gradually became a dalao that I grew more conscious of the power that comes with this term. However, I do not believe that everyone in the group, either a new member or senior members, is consciously aware of this power relationship, despite the fact that they are active users of this term and participants of the reproduction of this power relationship.

Interviews

Labov (1972) coined the term, the "observer's paradox", which describes how the phenomenon or object being observed is changed in the process of being observed knowingly, and that the research may be getting contaminated data that is deviant from the initial research interests. In trying to get the natural speech of New Yorkers, he explained that '[a]ny systematic observation of a speaker defines a formal context where more than the minimum attention is paid to speech' (Labov, 1984). In order to avoid the "observer's paradox" and observe the natural use of dalao in the daily interactions among the group members, I started interviewing group members quite late in the semester during which this paper is completed. With assumptions that visiting scholars participate in multiple Discourses and their participation is spontaneous and responsive to their environments (Gee, 1996), interview data were collected with 5 members by using semi-structured interview questions that took particular interest in the members' perspectives on the phenomenon where group members called each other dalao. The interviewee's length of membership in the group ranged from 5 years to 3 weeks. The following table shows some basic information of the interviewees. I interviewed Hai and Yong together in their shared office in the engineering department. I have also added my own information accordingly to show my positionality in the group.

Table 1
Interviewee Demographics and Membership Duration in Study Group

Name	Age	Gender	Cantonese Speaker	Length of Membership
Hao	25	Male	No	1 Year 11 Months
Xi	26	Male	No	5 Years
Yong	25	Male	No	1 Year 5 Months
Hai	25	Male	No	2 Years 5 Months
Gao	24	Female	No	3 Weeks
Me	27	Male	No	2 Years 5 Months

Themes from Findings

Defining *Dalao*

Most interviewees agree with the following definition of *dalao*. Within the group, a *dalao* is simply a member who has been in the group for a longer period of time. “Once you are here long enough, you automatically become a *dalao*,” says Xi. The time for a new member to become recognized as a *dalao* is usually a year, because after a year, new students join the group, and they are in the second year of membership. The second year signals an important status, as it would usually be the final year for the student if he were in a master’s program. In Ochs’s (1996) sense of social identity, a *dalao* identity indexes membership in this group and senior status and power. The power is actualized, for example, through determining which day of the week to meet and where to play. It is worth noting that the *dalao* status does not necessarily associate with the skill level of the player, yet the skill level indeed contribute to someone who is becoming a *dalao*. As Hao says, “it is usually the members with the core status, and whose words carry a lot of weight. But anyone can be a *dalao*.” Yong and Hai agree with each other in defining *dalao* in that the identity of *dalao* is “mutually defined.” It means that whoever comes out to play and is familiar with other members can be called a *dalao*. “As long as we are familiar enough with each other, we can call each other *dalao*. There is nothing more to it.” Hao’s comment resonates with this statement. He says, “being called a *dalao* is not the true representation of status. It’s more of a joke or compliment.”

Denying *Dalao*

The first interview question was: "Are you a dalao?" To this question, every interviewee answered no. This is an interesting phenomenon because all but Gao, the first female player who joined the group three weeks ago, can be considered a dalao according to the implicit one-year rule. When asked why they do not think they are dalaos, Hai said, "Nobody will call himself a dalao. Chinese culture stresses humbleness. Calling someone dalao shows your respect for him and you are elevating the person's status. As Chinese, we do not do this." Xi, the senior group member who has already graduated from the university with his doctoral degree, asked me back a question that corresponds with Hai's comment. He asked me, "are you asking this question because you think there is class stratification within this group... because usually people ask this kind of questions when there is a hierarchy." It is worth noting that Xi and Hai are the former and current captains of the soccer team. From their comments, it is felt that both of them subconsciously denied that there is a power differentiation or hierarchy within the group. This can be observed from another moment during the interview. When I asked why this group would adopt this use of dalao, Yong said that "because we are a group of students who play soccer, and as long as there is a group of soccer players, there are a few (球霸)s." It is hard to find an English equivalent to the Chinese word (球霸), but it means the players who control and dominate the group dynamics. While Yong's comment is implying the power differentiation within such a group, Hai commented, "but we are mostly friends, and nobody is really that dominant."

Relationships

As described in the context section, this group is a highly dense and multiplex community of practice (Milroy & Milroy, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is dense and multiplex because group members know each other from different venues, like being neighbors, lab-mates, coming from the same hometown, or having the same activities other than soccer. Additionally, group members mostly know each other very well. It is a community of practice because the group meets regularly, practices, trains, and plays matches together. Given this context, a further analysis of the relationships among the group members may reveal previously unknown dynamics among the group members. These dynamics are directly related to the use and users of dalao.

The relationships of the interlocutors who use the term dalao within the group may be categorized into four categories: dalao to dalao, dalao to non-dalao, non-dalao to dalao, and non-dalao to non-dalao. Within these categories, the interactions show different patterns.

Showing power

Holmes and Marra (2002) demonstrates that humor in several New Zealand workplaces contribute to the complex interaction of power and politeness in various subtle ways. In my observations in this group, dalao is used for humor frequently. However, used as a funny address term to each other, power is indexed through the use of dalao in different categories of relationships.

The following is a snapshot of a dalao to dalao conversation that happened openly in the group chatting environment, which means that every member can see their interaction.

Chinese:

大佬1: 大佬明天踢球怎么说?

大佬2: 早上还是下午?

大佬1: 上午马褂?

大佬2: 好, 那能来的报一下数吧。

English translation:

Dalao 1: Dalao, what's the arrangement for tomorrow's soccer?

Dalao 2: In the morning or in the afternoon?

Dalao 1: In the morning at Maguire field?

Dalao 2: Ok, who can play? Let's count the numbers.

Note that this is an interaction between two members who are both dalaos. Dalao here is used as a direct address term by a dalao who is calling for the group to play the next day. Although this interaction happens in the whole group chatting environment, only a few senior players get the right to decide, and the person who initiated the conversation is one of the dalaos. This conversation happens almost every week, when a few members initiate the discussion to decide when and where to play. Following this short conversation among a few dalaos, other group members will respond with a number, like 2, 3, 4, to indicate that they are coming to play. Therefore, the address term, dalao, is used to directly signal positions of power by an actual dalao. In other words, he is calling for his own kind. A counter example proves this observation. When a younger players asks if there would be anyone who wants to play on a certain day, sometimes their call is met with silence from the group. Maybe some hours later, someone would jump out and say something like, "dalaos are too busy today to play." The non-response indicates that there are only a few people who get to decide the time and place to play.

Politeness

In their research of naming and addressing practices in the US and England, Brown & Ford (1961) report that the asymmetric uses of title, names, and address terms directly indicate inequality in power between the interlocutors. Being an address term, dalao is used in all four kinds of relationships in the group. While there is an obvious power differential, dalao is almost always used as a term to show politeness, especially in non-dalao to dalao interactions. For example, younger players directly address an unfamiliar player dalao, and then ask what their name is. This is similar to Scotton & Wanjin's (1983, in Wardhaugh, 2010, p. 289) discussion of the changes and features of address terms in China. According to Scotton and Wanjin (1983), there are several combinations of title and given name. For example, null + title, first name + last name + title, or title + last name. In the case with dalao, younger players address senior players as dalao Zhang, or Shuzhan dalao. Based on the discussion of address terms by Scotton & Wanjin (1983) and Brown & Ford (1961), it is clear that this kind of use of dalao is signaling politeness by younger players. In other words, the use of dalao by younger players (non-dalao) often signals their lesser status.

The Illocutionary Force of Using Dalao

Closely associated with expressing politeness through using the address term dalao by younger members of the group, such speech acts usually have an illocutionary force (Wardhaugh, 2010), which means that such speech acts (calling others by dalao) are illocutions that often cause others to do certain things. Such illocutionary use of dalao comes from both senior and younger members of the group. Hao mentions in the interview that "calling someone a dalao is like a trigger to some meaning. Sometimes, when you call me a dalao, I know you are in a relaxed mood and trying to make fun of me. But sometimes, when someone calls me a dalao, there will be something that I need to do or someone I need to help." For a dalao who uses dalao as an address term, he might be asking for others to help with something. For example, a dalao might say, "Can any dalao bring a ball to the field?", which has a single function to ask someone to bring a ball. He might also say, "dalao, there is nobody here at the field!", meaning that he is asking people to come quickly.

Yong's comment reveals the illocutionary force that is embedded in the use of dalao as an address term. For example, the younger member might say these sentences in Chinese: 哪位大佬能待我一下?

English translation: “Can any dalao give me a ride to the field?”

Chinese: 哪位大佬路过我的小区？我的小区是…

English translation: “Would any dalao drive past my apartment? My apartment is at …”.

Such speech acts have the illocutionary force of asking for a ride. In the context of this group, there is almost no other way of performing this speech act. In other words, you cannot ask for a ride without addressing the players who can drive as dalao. If someone needs some kind of help, not using might be a face threatening act, violating the negative face of someone who does not wish to be bothered to drive out of the way to pick up someone, for example. In this discussion, I am only using the male pronoun because until three weeks ago, this group was an all-male group, and in the three weeks of having our first female member, Gao, she has not used it yet. Gao says in the interview, “yes, I have noticed, sometimes people use it to call each other. But I haven’t started using it.”

Building Solidarity

Despite the semantic load associated with the term dalao, this term simply could be used between group members to signal solidarity. This could happen in dalao to dalao and dalao to non-dalao interactions. Between the interlocutors with equal status, they call each other with the tacit recognition that they have equal level of power. Any use of dalao between each other and any joking about each other are all signaling the solidarity between them. In dalao to non-dalao interactions, the dalaos call the younger or newer players dalao to show a sense of welcome. .”

Hedging and Teasing

There is a subtle distinction between using dalao to build solidarity and using dalao as joking in conversations. Boxer & Cortés-Conde (1997) differentiated three types of conversational joking, namely, teasing, joking about an absent other, and self-denigrating joking. In a lot of circumstances, group members refrain from acknowledging that they are dalaos themselves. This is because dalao is often used to tease each other. One observed pattern can characterize hedging on the part of all players. For example, when there is a game coming up, both the dalaos and non- dalaos in the group will say these sentences in Chinese.

Chinese: 我去给大佬捡球。

English translation: “I will be there to be the ballboy for dalaos.”

Chinese: 我去给大佬送水, 看管饮水机。

English translation: "I will be there to take care of the water station for the dalaos."

Chinese: 我去陪大佬散步。

English translation: "I will be there to accompany the dalaos."

The speaker of this kind of utterance is usually a dalao who is playing in the starting lineup. These examples could be categorized to self-denigrating humor. While this is an all-male group, such speech patterns are undoubtedly gendered. In the interview with Gao, she said, "I am not a dalao, but maybe one day I will become one." To her, dalao is a gender-neutral word that has less to do with male gender but more to do with the length of time in the group and the skills you have.

Conclusion

An analysis of the dalao phenomenon has been a fun experience for me, a newbie in sociolinguistic research. From the data, no matter the member agrees with the power relations associated with the use of dalao, or tries to downplay it, it can be seen that the term dalao has experienced a semantic shift from a negative address term to a somewhat fun and respectful one.

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