A STUDY ON THE ATTITUDES TOWARDS ADDRESS TERMS OF HEARING AND DEAF COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The present study adopts a mixed method, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It investigates the frequently used titles by members of the deaf community and hearing people and it also explores the differences in the hearing and the deaf groups' attitudes towards the titles. The results show that the hearing group's acceptance of descriptive language and normal language is significantly higher than that of the deaf group, suggesting that deaf people are more sensitive to titles emphasizing their hearing disability and titles emphasizing the normality of the hearing people.

1. Introduction

From the earliest periods in history, themes such as sex, lust, god have already inspired taboos in all human societies (Fisher, Mirus & Napoli, 2018). However, the word taboo entered the English language in the 18th century, deriving from the Tongan tabu (Burridge, 2010). The term was originally defined as prohibited behavior that was considered dangerous to certain individuals or society as a whole (Burrridge, 2014). More specifically, a taboo is concerned with the prescription of behavior for a specifiable community of one or more persons at a specifiable time in specifiable contexts (Allan, 2018). Thus, culture and occasion are extremely important elements in judging whether a behavior is taboo or not. As taboo is dynamic (Burridge, 2014), it changes across culture and time and can be shown in both verbal and non-verbal ways. Therefore, taboo words are an essential topic because breaking rules might arouse considerable dissatisfaction (Gao, 2013). Since there is still a huge gap between hearing people and hearing-impaired people, cultural appropriation is a serious topic. Titles that are used by normal-hearing people to refer to the deaf community might seem impolite, offensive, or even insulting to deaf people, without hearing people realizing it. The present study explores the differences in attitudes towards titles related to physical traits such as the deaf, the hearing, etc. in hearing and

deaf communities, using a mixed method. It is hoped that the study can reveal the differences in the degree of acceptance or sense of identification of the commonly seen titles between hearing people and deaf people, determine which titles are taboo words in deaf people's culture, and diminish the existing cultural barriers and misunderstandings between the two groups, facilitating their communication.

2. Literature Review

With the thriving of linguistics, research on taboo words was carried out. Taboo words are used to describe the lexicon of offensive emotional language (Jay, 2009), which could cause harm on both individual and institutional levels. There have been many studies related to taboo words in recent decades. For instance, De Klerk (1992) examines whether women are as concerned about politeness and status as they are said to be or not. The result strongly challenges the assumption that women tend to stick to standard speech. Young females are familiar with, and use a large number of highly tabooed items. Stenström (2006) compares the differences between the use of taboo words in teenage middle- and upper-class girls in London and Madrid. Colbeck and Bowers (2012) test whether taboo words are more emotional in a native language compared with a second language, and find that the emotionality of taboo words in a native language is indeed higher than it is in a second language.

However, taboo words as an extremely common social and linguistic phenomenon do not only exist separately in a single culture, instead, they happen across cultures and languages. There are also taboo words in the cultures and languages of special groups, for instance, the deaf community and their language, the sign language, which attracted attention from scholars in the field of linguistics. Among the few studies of taboo terms in sign languages are studies related to taboo words that involve sexuality. Rudner and Butowsky (1981) study the attitudes of gay people from the deaf community, Washington D.C., towards 14 homosexual lexical items. Kleinfeld and Warner (1996) conduct a study concerning deaf people and hearing people's opinions on 11 signs related to sex. Both studies come to the conclusion that the iconicity of signs has a positive correlation with offensiveness.

Consequently, Loos, Cramer and Napoli (2018) analyze the linguistic mechanisms of introducing offense of German sign language users, discovering that signers rely on the iconic properties of signs to introduce and enhance offense.

A few studies of taboo words in deaf communities are relevant to deaf people's identification influenced by their physical traits. Mindess (2014) proposes that it is common within the deaf community to describe a person by some visually obvious physical traits. In other words, reference to one's bodily imperfection might not be seen as a taboo word in deaf people's

culture, but this rule only applies to deaf-to-deafcommunication. Jiang (2014) conducts a study on taboo words in Shanghainese sign language, pointing out that death, excretion, and sex are generally taboo words, while religious words are not taboos. Similar to Mindess' finding, deaf people in Shanghai create nicknames for each other for convenience since it could be difficult for deaf people to spell their names out through sign languages. Nicknames derived from or related to a deaf person's physical defect given by another deaf person could be acceptable as long as the name giver does not deliberately imitate the receiver's physical characteristics for other purposes (Jiang, 2014). Mirus, Fisher, and Napoli (2012) study the taboo expressions in American Sign Language (ASL), pinpointing that English and ASL exploit the same mechanisms for emotionally charged language - taboo terms, modulation of phonetic properties, and facial expressions - but to differing degrees. Later, their study shows that many taboo terms in the deaf community involve issues of identity (Fisher, Mirus, & Napoli, 2018), such as *disability*, *disabled*, *handicap*, etc., therefore it is considered very offensive and insulting when a hearing person expresses the idea that he wants to be deafened, even as a joke in a certain context. The American National Association of the Deaf (NAD, 2023) explains in an article about adjectives that are disliked by the deaf community, including *deaf-mute*, *deaf and dumb*, *hearing-impaired*, etc.

To sum up, there is a dearth of studies on the topic of taboo words used in the deaf community worldwide by academia. However, the deaf people also need the attention and care from the society due to the fact that they are an important component of an harmonious, equitable and developed society whose voices can't be ignored. As a consequence, this study concentrates on the deaf people and hearing people to examine their attitudes towards address terms and explore which address terms are considered to be taboo words. The present study aims to answer two main questions:

(1) Will hearing conditions affect people's attitudes towards address terms?

(2) Which address terms are taboo words in the Chinese deaf community's culture?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods design by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The research was conducted at two stages. During the first stage, the way that deaf people communicated was observed through an online chatting group, which was especially used for cultural and academic interaction among deaf people. The address terms used by both the deaf community and hearing community in the group chat were collected to identify the most frequently seen address terms. During the second stage, a questionnaire was used to explore the degree of acceptance and sense of identification of the address terms. The objective of the second

stage was to gain a statistically reliable conclusion about deaf people and hearing people's attitudes toward titles.

3.1 Participants

In the first stage, the authors observed deaf people's communication from an online chat group for academic and cultural purposes, consisting of 321 members, most of whom are hearing-impaired.

In the second stage, altogether 121 people participated in the questionnaire survey, 52 of them being deaf, and 69 being hearing. The participants include both males and females, and their educational backgrounds range from high school to Ph.D. The participants were grouped by their audile status for final data analysis, i.e. with or without hearing damage.

3.2 Instruments

A questionnaire was used as the main instrument for the present study, which was designed by the authors to access the participants' sense of identification or attitudes toward the selected address terms. The questionnaire composes of two parts.

The first part is the investigation of the participants' basic information, containing two questions about their hearing status and educational background. The second part is a 5-point Likert scale consisting of 16 items, and each item contains one address term. The participants were required to rate the items according to their personal attitudes towards them from 1 (very opposed) to 5 (very approved), the higher the score, the more acceptable the item is.

The 16 address terms come from two sources. Part of them were selected in reference to previous articles (NAD, 2023; Florida Department of Health, 2021), and the rest were collected from the observation of deaf people's chat at stage 1. The total 16 selected address terms are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Selected Address Terms

No.	Item
No. 1	the Deaf
No. 2	the deaf-mute
No. 3	the hearing-impaired
No. 4	the hearing-disabled
No. 5	the disabled
No. 6	the deaf
No. 7	silent people

No. 8	the hard of hearing
No. 9	the mute
No. 10	the physically-impaired
No. 11	people with hearing loss
No. 12	the able-bodied
No. 13	the normal-hearing
No. 14	the hearing
No. 15	normal people
No. 16	ordinary people

During the observation, it was found that deaf people commented on some address terms. For example, they showed great antipathy towards the term "the deaf-mute" by declaring that deaf people have no problem with their speech organs.In this case, the selection of the address term for the creation of the questionnaire follows two main aspects: (1) the frequency of the titles mentioned; (2) the emotional representativeness of the titles, i.e. the titles are of repulsion or preference.

Due to the cultural barriers between hearing people and deaf people, some extra explanations of the questionnaire items are necessary. According to Padden andHumphries (1988), the uppercase *Deaf* is used to refer to a particular group of deaf people who share the same language - American Sign Language (ASL) and a culture. Deaf people have found ways to define and express themselves through their rituals, tales, performances, and everyday social encounters. Chen (2021) also points out, in Western countries, scholars of deaf studies and deaf people themselves tend to capitalize the word *Deaf* to show respect for the deaf community, emphasizing the independence and equal right of deaf people. The questionnaire items include both the address terms which usually have negative meanings and the ones which are usually considered more positive, the habit of expression in the deaf community was obeyed by capitalizing *Deaf* or lowercasing *deaf* in the phrase *the deaf* to distinguish the emotional inclinations of these two items, in case readers do not understand the differences between them as they have the exact same written forms andpronunciations.

3.3 Data Collection

In the first stage, data were collected by observing how deaf people communicate with each other by typing in an online WeChat group of more than 300 deaf members. Special attention was paid to the address terms mentioned by the members, i.e., how hearing people refer to deaf people, how deaf people refer to hearing people, and how deaf people refer to themselves.

In the second stage, the authors conducted a questionnaire survey. The whole process of the

suvey was carried out online for efficiency and convenience. The participants were given enough time to read and answer every question in the questionnaire.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 Validity and Reliability Analysis

The authors did reliability and validity analysis after collecting and organizing the data from the questionnaire survey.

In general, the KMO value is used to test the whole structure of the whole measurement term. As shown in Table 2, the KMO value of the questionnaire is 0.786, and the significance value is lower than 0.05, which indicates that the questionnaire is of good validity.

Table 3 Reliability Analysis

KMO and Bartlett's Test		
Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		0.786
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	881.055
	df	120
	Sig.	0.000

Table 2 Validity Analysis

Cronbach's Alpha	Items
.862	16

Table 3 shows the results of the reliability analysis of the questionnaire, suggesting that the questionnaire is reliable (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.862).

4.2 Descriptive Analysis

The background information of the participants is shown in the following two tables. Table 4 is the results of the participants' hearing-status composition, whereas Table 5 shows the highest level of education of the participants.

Table 4 Hearing Status of the Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Damaged	52	43.0	43.0	43.0
No damage	69	57.0	57.0	100.0
Total	121	100.0	100.0	

As displayed in Table 4, the hearing conditions of the participants. Among all 121 participants, 52 of them are deaf people, occupying a propotion of 43%, and the rest 69 are hearing people, the propotion of whom is 57%.

Table 5 Educational Backgrounds of the Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
High school	2	1.7	1.7	1.7
College Degree	6	5.0	5.0	6.6
Bachelor	80	66.1	66.1	72.7
Master	29	24.0	24.0	96.7
Doctor	4	3.3	3.3	100.0
Total	121	100.0	100.0	

In Table 5, the educational backgrounds of the participants are shown. 66.1% of the participants (N = 80) have obtained a bachelor's degree, which comes in the first, while 24% of the participants (N = 29) occupy the second place by having received a master's degree. Participants of high school level and doctor's degree only take up altogether 5% of the whole, indicating that the disparity between the participants' educational backgrounds is relatively small.

4.3 Difference Analysis

Independent Sample T-test analysis was conducted to measure the differences in the attitudes toward the selected address terms between the hearing group and the deaf group. The results of all 16 items and the total scores are respectively given in the form of a table for clarity and audiences' convenience.

Table 6 Differences in Hearing and deaf participants' Attitudes towards the Address Terms

	Hearing status	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
the Deaf	Damaged	52	3.31	1.147	4.165	0.000
	No damage	69	2.51	0.964		
the deaf-mute	Damaged	52	2.19	1.189	-3.525	0.001
	No damage	69	2.84	0.834		
the hearing-impaired	Damaged	52	4.1	1.053	3.84	0.000
	No damage	69	3.42	0.881		
the hearing-disabled	Damaged	52	2.98	1.276	2.114	0.037
	No damage	69	2.55	0.963		
the disabled	Damaged	52	2.62	1.255	0.705	0.482
	No damage	69	2.48	0.885		
the deaf	Damaged	52	1.6	1.053	0.991	0.323
	No damage	69	1.43	0.737		
silent people	Damaged	52	2.96	1.204	0.706	0.481
	No damage	69	2.83	0.907		
the hard of hearing	Damaged	52	3.13	1.253	1.747	0.083
	No damage	69	2.81	0.772		
the mute	Damaged	52	1.58	1.126	0.244	0.807
	No damage	69	1.54	0.698		
the physically-impaired	Damaged	52	2.71	1.348	-0.832	0.407
	No damage	69	2.88	0.932		
people with hearing loss	Damaged	52	3.25	1.37	-0.542	0.589
	No damage	69	3.36	0.907		
the able-bodied	Damaged	52	3.52	1.213	2.606	0.01
	No damage	69	3.03	0.857		
the normal-hearing	Damaged	52	3.87	1.121	3.489	0.001
	No damage	69	3.2	0.964		
the hearing	Damaged	52	3.96	1.028	7.591	0.000
	No damage	69	2.72	0.765		
normal people	Damaged	52	3.4	1.176	1.371	0.173
	No damage	69	3.13	1.013		
ordinary people	Damaged	52	3.04	1.066	-0.03	0.976
	No damage	69	3.04	0.794		
Total	No damage	52	48.21	11.028	2.588	0.011
	Damaged	69	43.78	7.791		

The Independent Sample T-test results show that the hearing and deaf participants' attitudes towards *the Deaf*, *the deaf-mute*, *the hearing-impaired*, *the hearing-disabled*, *the able-bodied*, *the normal-hearing*, and *the hearing* are of significant difference ($p<0.05$). The most prominent differences lie in four address terms: *the Deaf* ($p<0.01$), *the hearing-impaired* ($p<0.01$), *the normal-hearing* ($p<0.01$)and *the hearing* ($p<0.01$). Combined with the analysis of mean scores of these items, the hearing group's rating of the address term *the deaf-mute* (Mean = 2.84) is higher than that of the deaf group (Mean = 2.19), whereas the deaf group give generally higher scores for *the Deaf*, *the hearing-impaired*, *the hearing-disabled*, *the able-bodied*, *the normal-hearing*, *the hearing*. Therefore, the hearing group seem to be more tolerant of the address term *the deaf-mute* (Mean = 2.84), but they consider several of the most prevalent address terms *the Deaf* (Mean = 2.51), *the hearing-impaired* (Mean = 3.42) and *the hearing* (Mean = 2.72) used or once used by the deaf community more unacceptable than the deaf group (Mean = 3.31; Mean = 4.1;Mean = 3.96) do.

In contrast, the p values of the disabled, the deaf, silent people, the hard of hearing, the mute, the physically-impaired, people with hearing loss, normal people and ordinary people are all above 0.05, indicating that the hearing participants as well as the deaf participants hold similar attitudes towards these items. Compared to the mean scores of other words of no significant difference which are usually around 2.5 to 3.5, the term the deaf have received rather low mean scores of 1.6 (the deaf group) and 1.43 (the hearing group) respectively. The same case happens to the term the mute, with mean scores of 1.58 (the deaf group) and 1.54 (the hearing group), suggesting that both the hearing participants and the deaf participants remain negative feelings about these two items.

To the deaf group, the most acceptable and unacceptable address terms are respectively *the hearing-impaired* (Mean = 4.1) and *the mute* (Mean = 1.58), whilefor the hearing group they are *the hearing-impaired* (Mean = 3.42) and *the deaf* (Mean = 1.43).

The total scores of the hearing group and the deaf group are of significant difference ($p<0.05$), indicating that the personal attitudes of hearing people and deaf people towards address terms vary in general.

5. Conclusion

Taboo terms are coined in communities of different cultural backgrounds, which are influenced by certain traits of that very community. The article reports the differences in hearing and deaf people's attitudes towards the commonly-used address terms and intends to discover which of them are taboo words for the Chinese deaf community.

According to the results of the present study, hearing conditions will affect people's attitudes

towards address terms. Hearing people and deaf people's attitudes vary most significantly in three terms, which are *the Deaf*, *the hearing-impaired* and *the hearing*, with the first and the third being commonly-used titles in the deaf community and scholars of deaf studies, and *the hearing-impaired* was once frequently used due to its political correctness but now abandoned by the American deaf communities (NAD, 2023). However, all of these three address terms are considerably acceptable for Chinese deaf people, *the hearing-impaired* rated by both the deaf group and the hearing group as the most preferred address term of all 16 items, which conflicts with NAD's (2023) conclusion, and this is probably because of the different social backgrounds and cultures between the U.S. and China. One thing to be noted is that hearing people show less sensitivity to the term *the deaf-mute*, while the degree of acceptance of this term is significantly lower among deaf people. The assumption is that because of the lack of prompt language rehabilitation treatment, many deaf people have lost the chance to utter words correctly as hearing people, in consequence, deafness is usually related to muteness, despite the fact that deaf people have normal speech organs. In addition, the Chinese deaf community as an alternative group is paid less attention to, but with the thrival and impact of social media, the outdated wrong idea of "deaf people are mute" has been spread and misled hearing people in China. Thus, the address term *the deaf-mute* seems to be more tolerable to hearing people.

The ratings of each address term given by the deaf participants can function as a guidance or reference for judging which items are tabooed in Chinese deaf community's culture. The 5 items that have received lowest mean scores are respectively *the mute*, *the deaf*, *the deaf-mute*, *the disabled*, *the physically-impaired*. These items either emphasize the incapability of speaking or physical disability, indicating that deaf people do not agree with the wide-spread opinion of "deaf people are mute" among hearing people and they show refusion to be called disabled. Combined with the author's observation in the group chat of deaf people, it is assumed that many deaf people are averse to identify themselves as disabled, as their limbs and brain are complete and healthy, which allows them to work. The finding is consistent with Fisher, Mirus and Napoli's (2018) research, reinforcing that taboo words in deaf people's culture are closely related to their self-identification.

The present study helps fill the gap in linguistic studies on special groups in China and reduce cross-cultural misunderstanding caused by linguistic factors, dedicating to fairness, solidarity and harmony of the Chinese society. Besides the contribution this study could make to the linguistic studies on Chinese alternative groups, some limitations of the present study are to be acknowledged. First, the sample size of the present study (121 participants) is relatively small, which can be improved by enlarging the number of participants in future studies. Second, other elements could be involved in the study for deep exploration, and the authors will take more factors such as sex, educational background, etc. into consideration for more in-depth studies.

Third, the proportions of deaf participants and hearing participants are a bit inbalanced. Improvements could be made by prolonging the period ofcollecting questionnaires.

6. Implications

The present study confirms the differences in people's attitudes towards address terms under the influence of their hearing status, drawing more attention to the plight of the deaf community in China, which could stimulate academic production in the field of linguistic studies targeting at special groups as well as facilitate the Chinese society to be more developed, humanized and harmonized.

At last, practical advice on hearing-to-deaf communication should be given. According to Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975) in conversation, people should not violate the maxim of quality. In other words, what is uncertain or untrue should not be said. In this case, hearing people should avoid tabooed terms which are unreal, suchas relating deaf people to muteness. Also, use euphemisms when referring to deaf people's hearing defect, avoiding straightforward address terms as much as possible.

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